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Hostage Of The Man-Pack

By C. Hall Thompson

Fort Unity's fur-greedy factors were overbearing; the work-worn *engages* were grumbling. Hate was spreading like wildfire, building up to a vicious showdown . . . and pretty Isabel Fallon, the shapely wench from St. Loo, was the spark that was aimed to set off the explosion.

"WHY CAN'T he kill him?" London said. "Why can't he just gun Moffat and be done with it?"

"That would be too clean," Taylor said. "It would be the decent thing to do. It wouldn't be La Bruge . . ."

Some of the men muttered bitter agree-

The Fort was an inferno. Unbelieving, the crowd stood back and watched.

ment. They sprawled in a rough queue along the muddy riverbank; the Yellowstone lapped at their cowhide boots; they were too tired to move their feet. They lay still, breathing heavily, their backs throbbing with the memory of huge fur packs. Through branches of larch and fir the late May sky looked sullen. There would be more rain; tomorrow, the going would be worse; La Bruge's mood would go from vicious to murderous. One of the engages, a young kid with greasy yellow hair, buried his blistered face in his arms. Nobody looked at him while he cried.

Jed Taylor shook his head; a muscle worked in the square jaw.

"I thought the return trip would be better," he said thickly.

London let out a dry laugh,

"You always think it'll be better; everybody always hopes it will. Moffat hoped . . ."

London's cool gray eyes turned to the small hulk of man curled against a wet tree stump. Moffat hadn't moved for ten minutes; the oiled portage collar slipped from his shoulders; he had crumpled where he stood. A thick pulse fluttered

feebly in the swollen neck; there was a raw bruise on the temple where La Bruge's whip had cut in when Moffat stumbled once, early that morning, spilling packed beaver pelts into the river muck. Moffat's breathing came in hollow gasps. London frowned and looked away.

"His heart was never good," Taylor said.

London scraped caked mud from his cotton shirt; he pulled the sticky cloth from shoulders chafed raw by the portage harness. His voice was dull, empty.

"Let him die. At least he'll get rest. La Bruge won't be able to drive him anymore . . ."

The men mumbled; the yellow-haired kid had stopped crying; he lay staring hopelessly into space. Larch leaves stirred in a listless wind; on the far side of the Yellowstone, an elk came out of the brush to drink; he caught the man-smell and fled downwind. London looked from one man to the next. They were a sorry, beaten mess. They didn't look like the same men who had left the Arickaree village a week before. There had been hope, then.

La Bruge's humor had been good; he had fed the Indians whiskey spiked with laudanum and cheated them out of several thousand prime furs. Beaver, marten and mink had been wheedled from drunken bucks with useless trinkets. La Bruge's massive shoulders shook with harsh laughter. The taste of victory was good in his mouth. He thought of how Monsieur Galt, the Bourgeois, would praise him, when, days ahead of schedule, he marched into Fort Unity with his take. Galt might even consider a promotion . . .

Everything had been fine; La Bruge had laughed with the men; he had even lowered himself to mess with the engages. The weather was warm and dry; an easy current carried the loaded mackinaws swiftly north toward the Fort. Once or twice, the men even started to sing.

"The river that we sail is the pride of our country; the women that we love are the fairest upon earth . . ." It didn't last long; on the night of the third day out, the rain began.

The river turned wild and dangerous; boats were caught in cross currents; one mackinaw shattered against a rock in the rapids and was lost; four packs of a hundred pelts each went with it. La Bruge was like a madman; his huge bulk lunged through thick rain, driving the men on through muck that reached to the knees. He gave them no rest. He would be late, now; he would have losses to report. Galt would stare with cold dark eyes and tell him he was a bungling fool. La Bruge swore; he beat the men. His powerful shoulders could heft a pack of five hundred pelts with ease; he expected men half his size to do the same; men like Moffat . . .

MOFFAT lay very still; the bluish eyelids were partly open, showing the whites of his eyes. The swollen mouth gaped but they could no longer hear the empty rasp of his breathing. The blond kid stared at the small, broken body; from time to time he let out a dry sob. Nobody said anything. Men sprawled where they had fallen, sleeping the dead sleep of exhaustion. London and Taylor sat still, watching the listless pulse in Moffat's throat.

"Allons!"

The word was raw and very loud. Men started and groaned and rolled over, cheeks muddy where they had lain against the ground. One of them muttered a prayer in French. Things stirred along the river edge. Engages stumbled to their feet and stood gazing dully at the packs they would have to carry.

"Allons! Rise and shine, my pretties!"

Tall river brush crushed and parted and then La Bruge was among them, tremendous and unsmiling and stinking of greased buckskin. He stood, hands on hips, legs apart, his sensual mouth curled down at the corners. His sour black eyes moved from man to man. They stopped at London. London had not gotten to his feet. La Bruge picked porkfat from his teeth with a broken, yellowed thumbnail.

"If it pleases M'sieu London," he said mockingly, "we resume our journey, now . . ."

The face hardened; the mockery slid away. La Bruge slapped on thick thigh with the butt of a blacksnake whip.

"When I say move, you move!"

London sat still; their eyes held. Jed Taylor looked worried. A halfbreed whis-

pered to another: "He'll get the whip for this . . ." The men waited. Very deliberately, unblinking under La Bruge's stare, London got to his feet. A harsh laugh broke the stiff folds of La Bruge's face.

"All right!" he rumbled. "With M'sieu London's permission . . . Allons!"

Some of the engages laughed obediently. Packs hove to red-raw shoulders and harness leather cut into old wounds. The blond boy stumbled; La Bruge cursed him. Crudely, the line began to form. At the foot of the wet tree-stump, Moffat did not move.

La Bruge had started toward the head of the line. He stopped. Slowly he walked to where Moffat lay. Del London's hands turned into fists. Taylor touched the hard wrist and shook his head. London stayed put. La Bruge stared down at the curled, bony form; his lips twisted.

"Come on, little pig! None of your tricks!"

The blond boy looked sick with hatred; the words broke through before he could stop them. "For God's sake, let him alone!"

An uneasy murmur ran through the engages. La Bruge only stared. The kid turned away. Taylor's warning didn't stop London, this time. He let the pack slide from his shoulder's and went to Moffat's side. He knelt. La Bruge didn't interfere. The men watched. Somewhere in the close stillness a moose trumpeted. After a while, London stood erect. His fists were knotted again. La Bruge brought back that mocking smile. Abruptly, his heavy boot pounded into Moffat's ribs; the little frame jolted; somebody groaned as if he had felt the blow.

"All right!" La Bruge roared. "Get up, you lazy lout."

The words died. La Bruge's kick had twisted the slight form into an unnatural position. It stayed that way. Del London's voice quivered with hatred.

"The man's dead, La Bruge. If you touch him again, I'll kill you."

The smile jelled on La Bruge's lips; it stayed in place. His fist was wrapped so tightly around the whip-butt, the knuckles had gone livid. It was quiet; London could hear the Frenchman's heavy breathing. The words came through La Bruge's teeth.

"Grandmere has a big mouth, non? Still, one sees the teeth are very little. Their bite cannot be dangerous."

London didn't smile. Standing over Moffat's broken body, he looked powerful. The cotton shirt spanned the muscles of his shoulders. His feet were a little apart, the weight poised on the balls of them. His face was long and made of hard browned plains; the mop of sandy hair made him seem even taller than six-two. It didn't keep him from looking small beside La Bruge.

The men waited; waited for London to turn away; waited for the taunting laugh they would have to echo. It didn't come. London stayed where he was.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he said, finally. "You should be careful, La Bruge. We're not all like Moffat."

La Bruge tried the laugh; it fell flat; the smile went away. Quietly, Jed Taylor said: "Take it easy, Del."

London wasn't hearing him. His eyes stayed on the mountainous French trader.

"You can kick little men around just so long, La Bruge. Then, something happens inside them. They get to wondering why they should take it. They get to thinking they're not slaves, they're free men. That's when you want to watch them. After the wondering comes the fight . . . Sooner or later, they'll wipe out your rotten kind of slavery."

"You mean they'll report me to the Bourgeois?" Sarcasm made the words a taunt.

There was no amusement in the bend of London's lips.

"Report you?" he said. "To the man that gives you the crooked orders in the first place?" The laugh was dry and flat. "To Jonathan Galt of Fort Unity?" The long tawny head moved slowly from side to side. "No. We wouldn't do that. We know Galt. He's the boy that shows you how to swindle redskins with a swig of rotgut. He's the boy that lets you kill the Moffats. Sure. Anything goes with Galt. Just so the pelts pile up and his poke keeps getting fatter."

Jed Taylor put out a large square hand. "Del . . ."

"No!" La Bruge said sharply. "Let

M'sieu London wag his tongue. It'll make a funny story to tell the Bourgeois."

London said in a toneless voice: "One of these days the funny stories will be done with. You won't be around to tell them; Galt won't be around to listen."

La Bruge laughed; nobody echoed it; he shook his head as if everything was terribly amusing.

"Mais, oui! I must tell M'sieu Galt. He is in grave danger. In the engage ranks there is a man who will ruin him. He is to be brought to book by a scum of a . . ."

The knuckles caught him across the mouth; the sarcasm slurred. La Bruge didn't stagger. His head jarred back and then was still. He looked surprised. It lasted only a moment. The thick lips warped and spat viciously. The right came around with a force that would have broken London's neck. Del was under it and then up, inside La Bruge's bearish guard. He slammed a left into the solid wall of chest; there was a grunt. Somewhere, someone said, "Holy Mary!" in a hollow voice.

La Bruge crashed backward; his left fist still clutched the whip-butt. He waited for London to come in. Jed Taylor yelled: "Look out, Del!" It didn't do any good. London had forgotten the whip. The butt was lead, covered with leather; it laid out flat, grazing London's right temple; there were over two hundred pounds behind the blow. London stood there a second, held up by his own tension. His knees bellied. He fell with a wet, dead sound.

LA BRUGE swayed; his chest heaved roughly. He wiped blood from the corner of his mouth. He spat again. The spittle made a reddish blob in the mud. No one seemed to move. Then, Jed Taylor went to London's side. He worked the head back and forth and said, "Del," a couple of times. London stirred. He got to one elbow; the whip had left a white welt along the side of his face. For a long moment, he and La Bruge stared at each other. Abruptly, the Frenchman straightened and turned to the men.

"The show's over," he said thickly. "Heft those packs."

They did. The blond kid glanced at the crumpled heap by the tree stump.

He said: "Moffat ought to be buried."

La Bruge looked at him. That was all. The kid didn't say anymore. Nobody made a move toward Moffat. Jed helped London to his feet. La Bruge watched. Del took an unsteady step. That mocking grin recurled the French trader's mouth. "All right!" he roared. "Move!"

They moved. The sky had gone darker; drops of rain sifted through larch branches. The men didn't notice them. They walked mechanically, each following the man ahead without looking. Their eyes were empty. The packs got heavier; portage collars dug deeper into raw flesh. They went on. The rain got worse. One man kept looking back every few minutes, as if he could not forget Moffat. London staggered under his pack; his head throbbed; he thought he would fall. Jed Taylor caught his arm. The welt on his face had begun to discolor. He felt sick. Up front, he could hear La Bruge cursing someone. Moffat died in the forenoon; they didn't strike camp for the night until sundown. They had not rested once in the interim.

The rain had stopped, but the wet-wood fire was sickly and without warmth. Engages lay in weary bundles on the sodden ground. Some of them tried to eat. The cornmeal mush had gone sour; there were maggots in the pork. London flung the mess away; a thin man with hungry eyes picked the pork out of the mud, scraped off the maggots and ate it. Somewhere in the shadows, a greenhorn who couldn't stand the dampness coughed as if he would spit up his lungs. Nobody talked. Jed Taylor sprawled by the fire; he was carving something with his hunting knife in the bark of a splintered branch. A vague smile played across his broad face. He looked at London. Del sat staring into space; the welt gave his features a brooding expression. He felt Taylor's eyes. He picked up a twig and very deliberately snapped it in two. He sighed.

"I keep thinking of Moffat."

"Forget it," Taylor said. "Thinking won't help. Just let it go."

London threw twig fragments into the fire.

"Sure," he said softly. "That's it. Let it all go. The fighting; the rain; the stinking mess they call food. The wet

loneliness you never get shut of out here."

He looked at the dead, empty faces of the men who lay about the fire.

"Yeah," he told Taylor. "Get away from the whole rotten set-up. I can do that. When we get back to the Fort, I can quit."

"You're signed on for three years," said Taylor quietly. "Galt's got ways of holding a man to his word."

London's lips stretched tight.

"Galt or no Galt, I'm finished."

With sudden anger he ripped up a handful of wet grass.

"I'm sick of it. Sick of Moffats being pushed around. Sick of bedding down in mud. Sick of being alone in this big lonesome that keeps closing in on a man. I want decent grub, Jed. I want a bed with sheets and a chance to say 'Go to hell' to the Galts and La Bruges. I want civilization and a white woman."

Taylor didn't look up. He studied the work of his knife. The squared face was flat, now; unsmiling. His voice was toneless.

"What about Tawn?"

"Tawn . . . ?"

It wasn't a name; it was a memory running softly off the tongue. London sat very still, with his eyes half-closed, and for a moment, it wasn't rain-logged May, but August, and last year, with the smell of sunburnt greenness washing the rolling plains outside Fort Unity, and the name was a girl with the glow of Arickaree blood in the smooth breadth of her cheeks. She had been young with the winning way of a yearling, awkward, timid, and still warmly curious. Her mouth had been full and firm under his and now, remembering he smiled at the tiny silence of her mocassined feet. It had been a fine summer with Tawn at the Fort, but still . . .

He did not look at Jed.

"Well?" he said softly. "What about Tawn?"

"You're making plans," Taylor said. "There's no place in them for her. You leave here, you leave Tawn."

London didn't move for a time. Then, he let the grass-shreds slide slowly from his fist. Some of them stuck to the palm; he brushed them off; the gesture had something final about it.

"There ain't been anything between us." He looked at Taylor steadily. "Never anything serious."

Jed ran a finger over his carving; he studied it. He spoke gently.

"Girls like Tawn are different, Del. Maybe these things are always serious for them."

The fire snapped; somewhere in the hills a puma screeched. The blond boy whimpered in his sleep. London looked away; his mouth worked.

"I don't know." He shook his head. "It's not that I want to hurt Tawn. Only, she's too much a part of this; too much of a piece with the things I want to get away from." The cool eyes grew warm and bright with a half-smile. "Jed, remember the white girls back East? The skin of their shoulders like cream above a cotillion-gown? And when you danced, their hand in yours, little and soft and cool like the nose of a faun. I knew a girl, once, that had hair like wheat in the summer sun."

Taylor laughed softly. There was no mockery in it. His eyes moved with gentle calm over the billow of plains beyond the washing Yellowstone.

"Maybe you're right . . ." He turned back to London quickly. "But, I think you're wrong. You belong in this big lonesome, Del; you think you hate it, but you don't. It's clean and simple in spite of the Galts and La Bruges, maybe because they never really touch it; they don't belong. You won't like their world. There's a darkness in it; the air is cheap and fenced-in like the air of a prison . . ." The broad smile turned wry; Taylor flung his knife at the ground; it stuck, upright, quivering. "That's where the real loneliness is, Del . . . in a world crowded with mixed-up people."

London stared at the knife; he took it by the blade and flicked it; the point sank into sod next to Jed's hand. Del grinned. He stretched back, with his arms under his head.

"If that's loneliness," he said, "it's my brand . . . Think of it, Jed. A job; good clothes; money; a white girl. Funny. I keep remembering that girl's hair the way it moved when the wind touched it."

Taylor didn't answer. The talk died away. Things were very quiet. Now and then that greenhorn coughed hollowly.

London lay with his eyes closed, planning how he would tell Galt to go to hell when they made the Fort in a day or so. The fire dwindled. Men stirred and groaned and slept again. After a time, London fell asleep, thinking of a girl with hair the color of ripened wheat. Jed Taylor was still awake. He worked over his carving with gentle care. He brushed away wood flakes and looked at the letters; they were clear and warm in firelight. He said the name very softly to himself.

"Tawn . . ."

II

FORT UNITY was getting set for a celebration. It wasn't the return of La Bruge's men that called for it; it took more than a homecoming trading-party to cause such gay painting of the inner stockade walls; the earth-covered buildings of the Fort were hung with brightly-dyed skins, and the flag-staff at the center of the compound was twined with red white and blue ribbon from St. Louis. At the rear of the Bourgeois house, the housekeeper, a fat Crow squaw named Popa, ordered workers about briskly. They boiled black New Orleans molasses, then pulled and twisted until it had hardened to candy. Jed Taylor swept the Fort with cool curious eyes. He looked at London.

"All this hullabaloo can't be for us."

La Bruge's men had come in through the double-leaved stockade gate almost unnoticed. A few squaws met white husbands; the unmarried men made for the Fort store or the comfort of Tom Coffin's bar. Breeds that worked in the Fort stored the furs; their minds were not on the job; they laughed a good deal and talked about the celebration. London didn't hear them.

He stood by the watering trough near the gate. He had not changed his clothes; dried mud still caked the shirt and buckskin trousers. Sweat and trail dirt smeared his face. He did not move. His eyes never left the porch of the Bourgeois house that lay just across the compound. Beside him, Jed splashed water on his naked chest and shoulders. He reached for his shirt to dry on, then stopped.

In the shadow of the store patio, a small figure moved. Her skin looked more rich in halflight; even at a distance he could feel the dark brilliance of her eyes. She wore slippers that glittered with beadwork, and a long deerskin wrapper. She smiled softly. It was for London. He did not see her. Jed touched his arm.

London raised on eyebrow in vague question; he did not look away from Galt's house.

"Del . . ." Taylor said. "It's Tawn . . . over at the store."

London's face didn't change. He shook his head.

"Later," he said. "Right now I got business."

Taylor followed the calm gray gaze. The porch of the Bourgeois house was not in shade. In white hot sunglare La Bruge looked even bigger. He stood on the porch steps talking with both mouth and hands. The man he spoke to listened without answering. He was not tall but the long thinness of his body made him seem so. His blond long hair had been bleached almost white by the sun. It made a kind of halo around the dark narrow ridges of his face. London stared at Jonathan Galt without blinking.

"Now, wait a minute, Del . . ."

Jed's voice didn't sink in. London straightened and began walking. The Indian girl put out a hand as if to stop him; her mouth got less soft with worry. Taylor went to the store patio. Neither Tawn nor he said anything. They watched Del.

Other people watched him, too. London walked slowly, deliberately toward the Bourgeois house. A couple of men from La Bruge's party came out of the bar and stared. A squaw stopped twisting molasses; her curious eyes followed London; the taffy sagged in her hands. La Bruge had stopped talking. Galt eyed the easy swing of Del's stride; the thin line of his mouth played with a smile. London's affrontery surprised others; it amused Jonathan Galt for the moment.

London stopped. Behind Galt's lank form, three breeds hovered. Colts were slung low on their narrow hips. Galt never went anywhere without them. Their beedy eyes did not leave Del. La Bruge's thick face was swollen with anger. London ignored it. He looked at Galt.

"You and I got some talking to do."

The smile twitched Galt's lip. He looked

cool and sure in the sunlight. The Fort tailor had taken extra care in fitting the deerskin shirt and leggings; rich fringes edged the seams. Designs of colored porcupine quills decorated the shirt; his moccassins were beaded and quilted. Like the Fort, its Bourgeois was dressed for celebration. Galt studied Del calmly; a small wind stirred a whisp of the sunbleached hair. Galt said quietly:

"La Bruge tells me you're not happy with us."

London laughed; it was a humorless sound in his throat.

"That's one way to put it."

"Seems like you're forgetting something, London. A paper you signed with the Company. 'Three years,' the paper says. For three years, you're my man. Remember the words? 'To serve the Bourgeois, to do his will, to seek his profit . . .'"

"To watch him kill helpless men," London cut in. "To watch him cheat and let him treat me like a dog . . ." The voice had gone flat and very clear; it carried in the stillness of the compound. "Those're some of the words that weren't on the paper. Some of the things I didn't know about when I joined your rotten outfit."

Galt's smile had not slipped, but it was too stiff, now, to be amused. He came down the steps very slowly. La Bruge got out of his way. He kept coming until he was within reach of London. He stopped.

"Three years," he said too softly. "You been with the Company two. You got one year to go. During that time you're in my command."

THE voice was almost friendly; the eyes weren't; neither were the knuckles. Galt swung backhand; fingers ripped across Del's tight lips. The dark face went darker. London said, "You dirty pig." His legs tensed but he did not dive for Galt. On the porch, the breeds moved all at once. Galt's hand shot inside the deerskin shirt. One step and Del would get slugs from four different angles; three Colts and a derringer. He stood still. A slow smile curved his mouth.

"We'll talk again, some time," he said to Galt. "A private talk. I never liked bucking a stacked deck."

Galt laughed; La Bruge laughed; the breeds on the porch snickered. All the way across the compound, with each step he took, London could hear the insolent echo of their laughter.

Jed and Tawn waited. Men's eyes followed Del; he did not look at anyone. He came slowly into the shadow of the patio. The welt of La Bruge's whip butt had begun to fade. There was still a bluish streak along London's temple. At the sight of it, Tawn made a small hurt sound. Her slim fingers traced the bruise tenderly. Del managed a vague, gentle smile.

"It's all right. It doesn't hurt, now."

"They beat you," Tawn murmured.

"It's all right," London repeated.

He wasn't seeing the girl. His lips had stiffened again. Over her dark head, he could see Galt and La Bruge talking. Their laughter had stopped. He could still hear it. A nerve in his temple twitched.

"That's what you want to run away from." Jed's voice was quiet. "You want to quit when you could stay and fight."

London said, "Shut up."

Tawn looked from one of them to the other. There was a question in the liquid blackness of her eyes. No one answered it. She touched Del's arm and smiled. Her teeth were very white against the full red lips.

"You should sleep, now; you need rest and clean clothes."

London nodded. He did not look away from the men on the Bourgeois porch. Taylor said:

"You tried suicide just now. If Galt wasn't in such a good mood today you'd be in the blockhouse."

Del laughed shortly; his eyes ran over the noisy bright gaiety of the Fort.

"Yeah," he said curiously. "The whole damn place is in a good mood."

He turned a questioning glance on Tawn; her smile softened and got warmer. A faint flush touched the smooth throat-column.

"It is because of the white-girl," she murmured. "She comes from St. Louis two days ago to marry the Bourgeois. She is very pretty. They call her Isabel Fallon."

London's eyebrow went up. "Fallon?"

"You got it." Jed grinned wrily. "Isabel, daughter of James Luther Fallon, vice-president of the Company."

Del whistled; it was a low, surprised

sound. His eyes swung back to the porch of the Bourgeois house; they hardened. The smile went away. "So, Galt holds four aces—and draws the wild deuce."

"There will be merry-making tonight." Tawn's voice was deep and eager. Her fingers brushed the sunburnt hair over London's ear. "The Bourgeois will give a ball in her honor; everyone will dance and laugh and make love." Her dark eyes veiled with a pretty mixture of coyness and daring. "Often I tell my people, there will be another celebration, Del. Before many moons they will feast at another wedding. My brother, Black Hand, laughs. But he knows I do not lie. I am not a child. He should not laugh, should he, Del?"

On the porch across the compound, men moved. Galt went into the house. La Bruge and the breeds were on his heels. London's pale eyes followed them. He wasn't hearing Tawn. In a low voice, he said:

"Someday he'll forget to bring along the watchdogs. It'll be just the two of us."

His right fist opened and closed. He straightened and then sighed. He looked at Jed and Tawn.

"I think I'll have a drink."

He went between the girl and Taylor; she raised a hand to stop him, then changed her mind. She did not say anything. She watched London go into the bar. Jed Taylor moved closer to her. She didn't notice. His fingers touched the rich black plait that brushed her shoulder. The square face softened; he smiled.

"You know," he said gently, "there're other white trappers, lady. They're not all named London."

For a moment, Tawn did not speak. She stared at the dim cool doorway through which Del had gone. The batwings still swayed listlessly. She looked as though she might cry. She didn't. It seemed a long time before she turned to Taylor as if some memory of his voice had just reached her. She asked softly: "Jed say something . . . ?"

The corner of his smile wavered. He straightened it and shook his head.

"Nothing," he said. "Only . . . I reckon I need a drink, myself."

He went in. Once, he looked back. Tawn was still there, staring at the swinging doors. She wasn't looking after him; she didn't even know he was gone.

DEL was not thinking of Isabel Fallon. She was nothing but a name to him. A name is easy to forget. Galt was something else. The sting of knuckles across his lips; the shame in the silent compound; the picture of a small warped body curled at the foot of a rotted firstump, waiting for a coyote to scent and devour its slow decay; things like that did not slip your mind. A man with that kind of memories wasn't in the mood for cotillions with coquettish Indian girls. Del stayed away from the ball.

He stood in the shade of the stockade gate. Once or twice the Mexican on guard tried to start a conversation. He got one-syllable answers. He gave it up. London leaned against the rough timber wall, staring at the moon-washed plains beyond. He told himself he wanted to get away and never see it again. He wanted to shut out the sound of fiddle music swinging through the brightly lit doorway of the Bourgeois house; to be deaf to the raucous merriment that was too much like an echo of Galt's sarcastic laughter. He swore softly. He did not hear Jed come up behind him.

Taylor got out tobacco and papers and rolled two. He gave one to Del. They lit up and exhaled. Neither of them spoke. The music kept coming, shrill and wild. Finally, Jed said:

"Why don't you make a play for his girl friend? That ought to get under his skin."

It was supposed to be a joke. Del only smiled slightly. Taylor had started a laugh. He stopped.

"Forget Galt," he said. "So you got a year to go; just drop the whole thing. It's the easiest way."

London didn't say anything. His face got hard at the mention of Galt. He crumpled the cigaret between thumb and forefinger. The crazy roar of a drunken breed came from the Bourgeois house.

Jed studied the bright tip of his smoke. His voice was quiet.

"Tawn's in there . . . waiting."

Del shook his head. "I'm a lousy dancer, pal. You take my place."

He hadn't taken his eyes off the billow-

ing plain grass. He did not see Taylor's face. He did not see the crooked smile that said, silently, "I wish I could."

Taylor shot his butt; it made a red arc against the night.

"She don't want just a dancing partner," he said. "She wants a gent named London."

He wasn't smiling, now. "She's a nice kid, Del. Treat her right."

London looked at him; slowly the cold gaze focussed and got warmer. He jogged Taylor's shoulder with a big fist.

"Sure," he said gently. "Sure, Jed."

They crossed the moonlit dust of the compound. The fiddle-squeal got louder and more frantic. A squaw came running out of the Bourgeois house with a laughing trapper hightailing after her. Del and Taylor went in.

The place was reeling to wild hoedown music. Brilliant candleflames winked at their countless reflections in the wall mirrors; precious fur skins draped the rough-hewn furniture. Crow and Arickaree looked weird in European waistcoats and pantaloons. Trappers in buckskin whirled Mexican and Indian girls between shots of whiskey. The fiddler sweated and scraped.

Tawn was waiting just inside. She did not look like an Indian; she had done everything to bring about that impression. Her mauve ball-gown was the last word straight from St. Louis, valanced and fringed in the best Continental taste; her hair was done like that of a white woman. Her eyes smiled at Del. The fiddler had subsided into a Viennese waltz. They danced. She was graceful and warm in his arms. London did not notice any of it. He had just seen Isabel Fallon.

She was staring directly at him. At first he thought he imagined it. You didn't expect that kind of woman to stare at a buckskinned trapper. She seemed tall on Galt's arm and almost too thin but there was an exciting litheness about the slim body. She slid through the whirls of the dance the way a mountain cat crept up on prey. Her hair was tawny in candlelight and she had pale blue eyes that kept swinging back to London after each waltz pivot. A stiff grin touched Del's mouth-corners. Isabel Fallon smiled back. He wasn't sure he liked the smile; he knew he didn't like the eyes. They were too cool and, at the same moment, too bright with hidden mockery. She had never spoken to him, but the challenge that flickered behind the pretty, civilized mask of her face was clearer than any words.

The fiddle dwindled to silence. Tawn was talking; he only half-heard. He could see Isabel Fallon's head, still and shining through the bobbing barrier of dancers. She said something to Galt. The Bourgeois nodded and smiled and went to speak with the fiddler. She fanned herself prettily. All the time, her eyes held London's. He heard Jed come up to Tawn and him. He heard himself say, "Why don't you two dance?" He didn't wait for their protest. He moved across the crowded room and went out through the door.

The porch was dim and cool. There was a smell of spring rain in the air. Del made and lit a cigaret. He smiled to himself and leaned against the hitching post. He did not have long to wait. Her slippers made very little noise on the plank floor.

London didn't turn. He let out a smoke cloud and said:

"You always follow strange men?"

Isabel Fallon came nearer. He did not have to turn. He could see her quite clearly, now, next to him, her skin pale and warm under the moon. Her gown rustled when she moved. He could smell lavender. She was smiling again. Her voice was soft; the thought of the mountain cat came back to him.

"Only the ones that interest me," she murmured. "I'm choosy."

Del looked at her mouth.

"You must've slipped when you picked Galt. You're bored already."

Her head tilted to one side, thoughtfully, prettily cat-like.

"I don't know," Isabel said. "Jonathan has his points. He's dominant. He's a man who gives the orders. I like that. He slaps men; he doesn't let them slap him."

THE smile stiffened on London's face. He did not say anything. He dropped the cigaret and ground it out. They were very close, now. She did not move. His hands came up; the fingers bit into her bare shoulders. She twisted and her mouth opened to scream. She didn't. His lips closed hers brutally; the small of her

back arched to the pressure of his arm. Her nails had begun to cut into his cheek; they stopped. The lips softened.

Galt didn't say a word. He just stood there, dark and tall against the yellow rectangle of the door. The light behind him glowed palely on his hair. Isabel's eyes opened and focussed and hardened. Abruptly, she drew away from Del. Her gown murmured. She was breathing quickly; even by moonlight, her face looked flushed. London and Galt stood still, watching each other. Galt's mouth was tight; his voice had that friendly, dangerous tone.

"If I see you near her again you won't have long to live."

Del turned slowly to Isabel Fallon; she was not smiling now but that silent taunt was still behind her eyes. Del poked in his pocket for makings. He began to roll one; his hands were steady. So were the words.

"Maybe you're warning the wrong one, Galt. Maybe you ought to tell her to stay away from me."

Galt's eyes darkened; the lips warped downward. He lunged, throwing a wild right. London dropped the half-made cigaret; his left caught Galt's wrist and thrust it upward; his right came in underneath. The Bourgeois doubled at the middle and looked sick. He went down on one knee. His hand poked into the flowered vest and came out with the derringer. A woman screamed. Shadows piled out through the doorway. Men cursed. Del heard Tawn call his name. He took a step back and let his foot fly; the boot caught Galt's hand; the derringer spun away into the dust. London closed in; his fingers knotted on Galt's lapels and dragged upward; Galt got the left in the teeth. He would have gotten more, but it wasn't just Galt anymore. Jed Taylor yelled, "Look out, Del!" London twisted and the massive frame was there, just behind him. La Bruge swore hoarsely; his arms circled Del in a brutal bearhug. Other figures came closer. Del pounded an elbow into La Bruge's gut. He saw a dark face that belonged to Ide, the leader of Galt's breed bodyguard; he saw Ide's fist go up, full of Colt; it came down. The barrel cut into his scalp just behind the right ear. He slumped.

He didn't pass out. Figures moved against a blurred screen. He could hear voices. Galt was on his feet; he rocked slightly; there was a blood-smear at the corner of his mouth. Isabel Fallon stood beside him, her arm linked in his. She was still breathing excitedly; her eyes were brighter; she stared at London's sagged form. Galt's voice was thick and raw.

"Lock him in the blockhouse. I'll deal with him later."

La Bruge growled and sank a knee into Del's back. London straightened under the pressure. His head pounded; he could feel something warm and sticky behind his ear. His stomach was a fuzzed knot. La Bruge and Ide dragged him through the muttering crowd. Behind him, he heard Tawn cry, "He's hurt. I want to go with him . . ." He turned to look. Gently, firmly, Taylor was holding her back. There was concern in the black Indian eyes; Tawn was crying. Beside Galt, Isabel Fallon straightened the folds of her ball gown with neat care. Her eyes met Del's; there was no concern in them; she did not cry out when Ide shoved him on toward the blockhouse. Her face was still, with that same strangely wild mockery behind the smile in her eyes. Del laughed sourly and swore. He wanted to slap her face. He wanted to kiss her again.

III

RAIN CAME in through the barred windows and loopholes. It made puddles on the plank floor of the blockhouse. The place reeked of decayed meat and damprotted wood. In one corner, a form huddled; it didn't look human; the hair had grown matted; the whip-scarred back had turned a sickly purple with infection. The other prisoner moaned feebly. Lying full length on his cot, London stared at the ceiling. He inhaled; the cigaret-tip was a red eye in utter darkness. A giant rat, catching sight of it, skittered back into its hole. Del lay still, listening to the measured tread of the guard, passing and repassing the bolted door.

She's no good, his mind said. She's like Galt and the rest of his mob. I ought to forget her; I ought to get out of here and leave the whole rotten mess behind. He repeated it over and over to himself. She's

no damned good. It didn't help. He couldn't forget her lips crushing like a bitter-sweet woods-fruit under his; he wanted the smell of her hair, the feel of her body arched against his arm. He wanted to slam his fist into Galt's teeth again, so she would know he didn't have to crawl to any man. He wanted to . . .

The other prisoner whimpered. London sat up. Deliberately, he snuffed out the cigaret. The dull rhythm of the guard's footsteps came and went. Del's hands moved swiftly, unhitching his plaited rawhide belt. His face was still and cold. He went to the grilled door.

"Guard!" The fingers worked; it wasn't just a rawhide belt anymore; it was a noose.

"Guard!"

The man came; a sallow Mexican face grew out of the rain mist; it stared at London through the bars. The guard growled: "Quien?"

London kept the words level.

"The other prisoner. He's dead."

The Mex's eyes slitted; they peered at the heap in the corner. Del stopped breathing. The other prisoner did not stir or moan. The guard looked convinced. London breathed again. The bolt scraped back in its socket. Grumbling, the Mex came in. He didn't get far. He didn't have a chance to cry out. The leather noose, circled his throat and tightened; a knee jammed into his spine. "Drop the gun," Del said softly. He didn't. The noose contracted. "Drop it!" He did. London let go of the belt; his left hand went up and down in a sharp slicing motion. The rabbit punch landed neatly at the base of the Mex's skull. He fell soundlessly.

London picked up the Colt. He went and stood over the other prisoner.

"If you can walk, there's a chance of escape."

The words had no effect; the crumpled hulk did not move. Vermin crawled in the raw whip-cuts. Del stooped and turned the man over. The eyes were open but there was no sight in them. Another Moffat, he thought, closing the eyes with gentle fingers. He stood up and cinched the rawhide belt in place; he tucked the gun into it and said, aloud: "He can't kill all of us."

Wet moonlight lay dead in the empty compound. The ball was over. A drunken Blackfoot, sprawled by the flagstaff, roused, sang a watery snatch of song, and passed out again. Nothing else moved. There was no other sound but the soft hiss of the rain. London bolted the blockhouse door. He didn't cross the compound openly. He kept to the low house-shadows. Once, somewhere behind him, a sound whispered. He flattened against a wall. Nothing. He went on.

Light sifted through a window of the Bourgeois house, falling in a muddy puddle across the boards of the porch. London could see the room. Bottles littered the floor; the decorations were torn and wilted; wax, melted from candles, made greasy pools on the mantle. It seemed lonely without the fiddle's frenzied squeal. Galt and Isabel Fallon stood by the fireplace.

They were arguing. Their backs were to the door. Isabel's pale shoulders were stiff. Galt waved an angry hand as he spoke. The words were blurred, then bursting clear as London swung the door inward.

"My dear Isabel, a man doesn't kiss a strange woman without some encouragement!"

"You tried to kill me when I said that."

There was a wry grin in Del's voice. Galt spun. Automatically, his hand went to the vest. He stopped. The Colt had left London's belt a fraction of a second sooner. Its muzzle was leveled on Galt's chest. Del kept smiling. Galt looked a shade paler under the sunburn. His hands itched at his sides.

"Now be reasonable, London. Killing me won't do you any good."

His voice was tight. Del's eyes swung to Isabel Fallon. She had not moved; her hands were clasped tautly; the knuckles were white. It wasn't fear. Her eyes were bright, again; her cheeks faintly flushed. The hint of a smile toyed with her lips.

Del looked at Galt. The words came through that hard grin.

"You're losing ground with the girl friend, mister. Maybe you don't know about little Isabel. She likes masterful men; she gets bored with men that take orders instead of giving them." His thumb clicked back the Colt-hammer. "Right now, you're not being very masterful."

"Wait a minute, London."

Del laughed; it was a sharp dry sound that cut Galt short. London shook his head.

"I'm not going to kill you, Galt. Murder ain't in my line. I want just two things from you. A little paper with 'three years' written on it . . . and a letter of credit for the pay coming to me . . ." The smile came back. "I wouldn't want to hit St. Louis without a stake."

"All right," Galt said hastily. "If you want to light out, I can't stop you."

The laugh reechoed. "You tried hard enough."

"The papers . . . they're in my office . . ."

THEY went into the office. It did not take long. Galt's hand wasn't very steady with the quill. London folded the papers and tucked them inside his shirt. He looked at Isabel. Her eyes had not left him for a moment. Excited admiration made them lovely. Del motioned to a rawhide lariat on a wall hook.

"Get it and tie him in his chair."

She used only half the rope; she cinched the last knot tighter. Galt glared at her. She ignored it. She stood there, watching London. Her smile was more definite, now. Del smiled back. He put the gun away and walked toward her deliberately. She did not back away. Her face was only inches from his; it was tilted upward; her eyelids were half closed. She looked like a woman waiting to be kissed.

London laughed. Isabel's eyes widened with sudden anger and hurt vanity. Del turned his stiff grin to Galt.

"You know something, Mister? If I'd happened to wink just now, you might've lost your lady."

Galt's lips were a bloodless line. Isabel Fallon was breathing heavily; her face was not so pretty and civilized anymore; some of the wildness had broken through to the surface. Her furious gaze followed London. She saw him set the crude chair back to back with Galt's. Her teeth dug into the red lower lip. The smile was still in London's voice.

"The rest of the rope ought to make a nice neat package of you two."

Breath burst from Isabel; she ran for Del. Her fingers clawed. He caught the wrists, twisting them down and back easily. She squirmed like a trapped wild thing.

"You . . ." The word was a thick impotent sound in her throat. "You . . ."

"All right, honey." London laughed. "Say it. This is no time to start acting like a lady."

He got her hands and feet tied. She couldn't kick or scratch anymore. The rest was easy. He gagged both of them. He straightened, looking down into Isabel's enraged eyes. The smile went away.

"If it makes you feel any better, lady, I mighty near gave you that wink. Only common sense broke through when I tried to remember your kiss. I saw what I was getting in for . . . Maybe that's because you made things just a little too easy for me . . . too much like a baited trap."

A muffled vicious sound came through the gag. London's mouth twitched.

"So," he said to Galt, "you can have her, mister . . . If you can hold her."

He went out. He stood for a moment in the dripping shade of the porch. He told himself he had done the smart thing, the right thing. Only, even with the door closed between them, he could still see the parted warmth of her lips, waiting for that kiss.

He said, "The hell with it!" and took a step forward. He stopped dead. The long fingers clamped on his shoulders were not gentle. London twisted abruptly; his hand went for the Colt. The voice was a sharp whisper in his ear.

"Easy, Del . . .!"

A soft laugh of relief sighed from London. Jed Taylor's face was a lighter square in the rainy darkness. Jed did not return the smile. He said levelly: "You're still set on running away?"

Del didn't look at him; he settled the Colt back in his belt.

"We need you, Del. You know that. We need men that can fight Galt and his kind."

"I told you," London said. "I got a bellyful of fighting. I'm done ramming my head against stone walls. Remember what I said? I want a good, easy life; I'm tired of being pushed around."

Taylor nodded slowly.

"And you remember what I said? About Tawn?"

London did not answer.

"Don't you see how it is with her, Del? In the eyes of her people, she's all but your wife. You could do a lot, here, with a 'Ree princess for a wife. A lot of good for the Fort . . . for the Indians."

"Look." London's mouthline stretched straight. "I'm set on doing good for just one boy . . . myself. No more of this wilderness. I want life. A white woman . . ." His gaze swung briefly to the door of the Bourgeois house. Then, he let out a short laugh. His fist brushed Taylor's shoulder.

"Marry Tawn yourself, pal . . . You'd make a perfect squawman."

Jed looked away. "Sure," he mumbled. "Perfect . . ." He straightened and sighed. "Well . . . There's a pack and pony ready for you outside the gate."

London raised an eyebrow. Taylor grinned and put out his hand.

"I had a feeling no blockhouse could hold you for long."

Del took the hand. "Thanks."

"Sure," Taylor said. "Take it easy."

"See you sometime, Jed."

"Yeah . . . Sometime . . ."

IV

NOTHING HAPPENED. For two days, there was only the rain dripping ceaselessly on his head and shoulders and the wet talk of the pines along the trail. He moved eastward at a steady rate, keeping to the beaten path that edged the swollen Missouri. He should have felt fine. With each mile he put behind him, he should have felt a freer man. It did not work that way. He wouldn't admit it, but it didn't. He slept badly; he blamed it on the muddy ground; he didn't let himself think about the dreams of Isabel Fallon. He rode on doggedly by day; he ate when it was time to eat. The cornbread and bitter coffee seemed tasteless.

In the morning of the second day he had begun to feel uneasy. The disturbed nickering of the horse had roused him; there had been nothing; no signs; no footprints. But after that, he could not get shut of the notion that somewhere, somehow, something was wrong. He rode more quickly and kept the Colt handy. When he bedded down the second night, the gun was just under the saddle he used for a pillow. It didn't do any good.

His camp was laid behind a thicket that screened him from view of the river trail. The fire had died to damp ashes. Even if he had been awake, he couldn't have seen the Missouri from where he lay. But he might have heard the soft swish of the canoe keel running aground. He might have caught the dank snap of a twig under careful feet. The horse whinneyed shrilly.

Del twisted; his fist darted under the saddle; he rolled over on his back. It was a bad position for firing. The shot went wild. He tried to get to his feet; the blanket tangled his legs. He stumbled and swore. They came out of the brush in a semicircle that closed in swiftly. There were four of them. London let go a right; it landed; an Indian staggered back. The others kept coming. Hands caught his wrists, twisting up and back. A knee buried itself in his groin. He doubled. Another knee caught him on the point of the chin. His teeth snapped shut painfully; he spun backward and fell flat. Half-darkness clouded his brain, but he could still hear.

A voice said thickly: "He's out. We ought to finish him, now."

"Get the papers . . ." The second voice was familiar. London rolled his head; the eyes wouldn't open. The voice came again. "They must be on him; they're not in his pack." Fingers clamped on his shirt at the throat, ripping it down the front. A hand fumbled with the papers. London struggled to one elbow. His eyes opened. There was a blur and then a face bending over him, the face that belonged to the familiar voice. Ide's mocking grin showed yellow teeth.

"We ought to finish him," the first voice insisted.

"No." The grin widened. "Without a horse . . . without grub . . . he won't last long . . . Then, if he's found, it won't be murder . . . It'll be just another trail-chaser found dead from hunger."

London tried to get up; his head whirled. "You lousy . . ."

He saw the boot coming; he couldn't dodge it. The heel slammed into his jaw. That was all.

Rain beat against his upturned face; he woke to its needled rhythm. He stirred.

Pain exploded inside his skull, and he sat up very slowly. The ground and sky spun and settled. He felt sick from the pain in his groin. There was blood dried on his jaw. He stared about, dully. The fire was scattered; his rawhide pack lay a few yards to the left, empty; the horse was gone. He frowned, feeling the bruised jaw; one hand touched the ragged shirt front. He remembered.

Lopsided pictures ran through his head. He felt dizzy, still the pictures kept flashing. He could see Galt's narrow face with its thin mouth smiling sarcasm. "You're wrong, London. The Company owes you nothing. You asked for a letter of credit, paying you in full. I gave it. If you 'lose it, that's hardly my worry." That was how he would say it and the grin would get nastier and go off into a laugh and then Isabel would be there beside Galt, laughing with him, wildly, tauntingly . . .

"Shut up!" London cried.

The words echoed and died. The dizziness got worse. He tried to stand. It was no good. The legs wouldn't work. He sprawled face down breathing harshly, closing his eyes against the pulsing pain of his head. Sleep, his mind said. You need sleep, now. Think later. Later . . . The rain beat a slow endless tatoo. The sickness came and went in waves. Even before he sank into exhausted sleep, he knew one thing.

He couldn't let Galt get away with it.

HE WAITED for moonrise. All day, he lay hidden on the brush-tangled crest of a knoll only a hundred yards from the Fort. The rain had let up. A slow dull sun played drily on unstirring prairie grass. He watched Indians and trappers move in and out of the stockade. The sun set. He did not move. If he approached the Fort by daylight, he would never reach Galt; there would be only La Bruge and Ide and then the dead blackness of the blockhouse again. His meeting with Galt had to wait for darkness.

It had taken him four days to get back; he had eaten only wild berries and the flesh of a snake in that time. His face was covered with a growth of sandy beard; the red scar left by Ide's bootheel showed through it. His hair was matted with dried rain; his lips were cracked. The slim length of him stretched in protecting grass, wearily still. Only the eyes that never left the Fort seemed alive with burning anger.

The moon rose; on the damp air, no sound drifted from Fort Unity. London stirred, groaned at his stiffness, and began to crawl. Only the faint sway of tall grass marked his passage; it might have been the coming and going of the wind. He reached the shadow at the rear of the stockade. He lay flat, breathing thickly. His eyes searched the rough wooden wall. Nothing. He drew a deep breath, stood abruptly, and broke into a crouched run. He sprang. His hands clawed upward and caught the pointed heads of the twelve-foot stockade timbers. Slowly, he drew himself up and over. The effort brought out cold sweat on his forehead. He dropped soundlessly and huddled by the inner wall, panting.

The compound was still In a far corner a candle burned in the hut of an Indian prostitute. The lights of Tom Coffin's bar were out. A dog wandered through the moonlight, sniffing the ground without interest. The Bourgeois house lay just twenty yards to the right of London. He made it easily. His foot touched the porch boards. He froze. The shot was a flat, muffled sound that seemed far away. He could feel blood pounding in his ears. He waited, then, laughed quietly to himself. Some breed on night guard taking potshots at a rat; it was a Fort pastime. He moved on into the shade of the porch. He was only a few feet from the door when it opened.

"One more step'll be your last."

It was a bluff. Ide had taken the Colt along with everything else. But, the bluff worked. The dim figure halted, flattening against the door. Something soft rustled. London's eyes got narrow; his voice came through dry lips.

"Isabel . . .?"

"Who . . . who is it . . .?"

The whisper was deep in her throat and tight with fear. The tension went out of London. A faint humorless smile curved his lips. He moved closer; he could smell lavender. Her face was not flushed, now. It was pale and still afraid.

"You . . ." she murmured. But there was no surprise in it.

"Yeah," Del said. "Me. Galt's men didn't do a complete job. I'm not pretty, anymore . . . but I'm alive."

"Galt's men?" It was supposed to sound puzzled.

London's grin tightened. "I guess you didn't hear of the little trick he pulled. I guess you didn't laugh about it with him . . .? Well, the laugh's over, lady. You might've known I'd be back, sooner or later, to even the score with Galt."

"No."

His hand had closed on the door latch; she caught it; her nails dug into his palm. Her mouth looked very red in the paleness of her face.

"No. You can't go in there."

"You, worried about me?" London's lips smiled; his eyes didn't. "Kind of a sudden switch, ain't it?"

The latch clicked under his thumb; Isabel twisted between him and the door. Her breasts heaved; her eyes were too wide.

"Del! . . . please . . . Can't you just . . . forget it? Just leave here? I can give you money if you need it . . . If you go in there, now, we'll both be in trouble."

He had been close to her, watching the full moist lips move. He had wanted to kiss them. He didn't. He drew back a little. His eyes narrowed.

"So, now we get the facts. We'll *both* be in trouble. If it was only trouble for me, you wouldn't mind."

"Del . . ."

He did not stop. The door swung inward, slamming against the wall. He took two steps into the room and pulled up short.

Candleflame flickered in the draught from the door. Del stared down at the man on the floor. The thin body was buckled in the middle. The derringer lay only a foot from the outstretched hand. Its cartridge had torn into the man's head. There wasn't much left of the face. Galt had stopped breathing.

Isabel closed the door softly, and stood backed against it. She did not look at the body.

Her hand was clawed on the latch. She watched Del walk to the table and snuff out the candles. He came back. She could hear his breathing, very close to her.

"Did you do it?" he asked.

Her voice wouldn't come; her mouth worked; finally, the words broke through in a wild rush.

"He said I was in love with you. He told me I was no good but he didn't care; I promised to marry him and I wasn't going to make him a fool by refusing. He came at me. You knew him. You knew that look he had, cold with hate. He would've beat me. He might've killed me. The gun was on the table."

London only stared. She put a hand on his arm. He took the arm away and reached for the doorlatch.

"Del, you're not going to tell them?"

A stiff smile slid across his mouth.

"You make up a pretty story, lady . . . Make it that pretty for them, and you'll get away with it . . . maybe."

His hand caught her shoulder, twisting her out of the way. He opened the door. Her voice stopped him.

"All right! Go on! Let them ruin me with prison. Maybe you're right. I don't mean anything to you. I'm just a mixed-up girl from St. Louis. I got bored with life, there; I wanted to live, find excitement and a man I could love . . ." Her tone had gone warm and throaty. "I thought Jonathan was the answer . . . That was before I met you . . . Well, what're you waiting for? I did it because of you, but that doesn't matter. Go ahead! Turn me in!"

He closed the door. She heard the strike of his boots on the floor; his fingers closed on her shoulders and his mouth came down hard on hers. Her skin was burning. She clung to him with all of her body. When he let her go, that flushed wild light was behind her eyes again. He brushed a whisp of hair gently from her forehead. His voice was hoarse.

"The men'll believe whatever I tell them."

HE SENT Isabel to her room in another part of the house. Then he went out quietly and across the compound. It was not hard to find Jed Taylor's room over Coffin's bar. He told Taylor only one thing; Galt was dead; he didn't go into detail. It took less than fifteen minutes for the news to seep through the whiskeyed sleep of the Fort. Trappers gathered in yawning, curious knots on the porch of the Bourgeois house. They talked

softly; now and then, one of them eyed London; there was no enmity in their glances.

Crow and Mandan craned necks at the doorsill for a glimpse of the body. Nobody looked broken-hearted. London waited. Once, on the edge of a group of men, he saw Ide. Ide looked the other way, uneasily. Finally, La Bruge came. He stared at the red mess of Galt's face and cursed in French. He looked at Del. That was when London gave them the story. He kept it simple. Galt had cheated him out of his pay; he came back to collect. Galt pulled the derringer; there was a fight and the gun went off. That was all.

A few men smiled stiffly; they all nodded agreement; the Indians studied Galt's body with an expression of calm relief. He hadn't been a popular man. Only La Bruge's eyes still questioned Del. The Frenchman scratched the stubble on his heavy jaw. His voice was thick with sleep and anger.

"So, all we got is your word for it . . . The word of a . . ."

He didn't say it. A threatening mutter had run through the men; the trappers nearest La Bruge bellied closer with the restless surge of the mob behind. La Bruge's mouth worked; you could see the thoughts running behind his bloodshot eyes.

He had controlled the men as long as Galt's authority backed him. This was something different. The authority was gone. The men had had a bellyful. They remembered too many Moffats. If London said the word, La Bruge would be keeping the Bourgeois company. The French trader glared, then blinked. He swore hollowly and spun on his heel, elbowing his way through the crowd. A sarcastic laugh went from mouth to mouth; La Bruge's scrowl didn't stop it. The men turned to Del; they had the look of men waiting for orders. Del said quietly:

"Somebody better call Tom Coffin. He's got a body to ready for burying . . . And there's a grave to be dug . . ."

That did it. Men moved. A couple of them covered Galt with an Indian blanket and carried him out of the house. Most of the crowd followed the body across the clearing to Coffin's bar. The Bourgeois house was empty and still. With slow deliberation, Jed Taylor closed the door and turned to face Del.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"Where's who?"

"You know who. It's a pretty yarn you told them, Del. Pretty enough to be a cover-up for a lady called Isabel."

London's eyes went flat. "Keep her out of this. You don't know she's mixed up in it."

"No. But, if she wasn't, she'd be here, now . . . wouldn't she?"

Del did not answer. He looked at the floor. Finally, he said, "Drop it. I told you. I want her kept out of it."

"Yeah." Jed nodded. "Sure."

Neither of them moved; there was a red-brown stain on the skin rug by the table. Taylor stared at it.

"You won't be going away, now," he said.

"No. I'll stay . . ." Del rolled a smoke and lit it. "She's got influence. With that, I can be Bourgeois. I can make the Fort decent; I can cut out a lot of the old sores. La Bruge. Ide. The cheating of the redskins."

Taylor broke in levelly. "It'd be better if you went . . ."

London exhaled; his eyes squinted behind the smokescreen. He laughed.

"You're talking through your hat, Jed. Few days back you were saying I should stay. Remember? Saying how much I could do."

"Get out," Taylor said. "Get out, while you can."

"Look, mister. Use your head. I can do things, now. I can help the Indians . . ."

Taylor shook his head.

"The Indians trust you, now. Leaving Tawn was one thing. They could overlook that, maybe. But, now you're back, they'll figure it to be just like it was. They'll figure you to marry Tawn. If you don't, you'll be breaking a trust. Her people won't cotton to that. Black Hand could raise a lot of hell, if he took it into his head you insulted his sister." The head moved from side to side again. "No, Del. You could do more good by just clearing out."

London killed the cigaret against the table-edge.

"Suppose I don't want to clear out? What if I say this is what I been wanting

all along? A decent job. A house to live in. A woman."

"Yeah," Taylor said tightly. "A woman."

Del's eyes came up fast; they were hard, like the rest of his face.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jed didn't blink. "You're not staying for the Indians. You're not staying for anything but her."

"So?"

"Listen, Del. Use your common sense. Get away from her. A woman like Isabel ain't for you. She's not meant for this wilderness."

London laughed drily. "You don't know this lady, mister. She looks civilized; only there's something under the crust; a wildness . . ."

He stopped. Taylor was shaking his head again.

"Her wildness is different than ours, Del. Out here, things are clean wild. What's in her is something else. Something crooked that lies and makes you lie for her. Something that kills . . ."

London was not laughing, now. His hands had curled into fists. He took two steps; they stood facing each other. It was a long time before Del said: "I don't follow you."

"Don't you?" Jed's voice was soft, steady. "Look; remember me? This is Uncle Jed talking. You tell the men a story. They swallow it because they want to. All right. But, let's face it, Del. You and me, we know it was just a story. Galt wasn't what she wanted. Not after she saw you."

The last words slurred. The backhand caught Taylor in the teeth. His head banged back against the door. He did not move. He just stood there, staring. A little blood wet the corner of his mouth. After a minute, he said calmly:

"You'll need help running the Fort your way. I'll be around if you want me."

He turned and opened the door. Del's mouth worked. "Look, Jed, I . . ." Taylor didn't stop. The door closed.

London stood still. He told himself it wasn't his fault. Jed had a right to stay out of this. It wasn't his party. What did he know about it . . . or her? Nothing. London said it aloud. "Nothing. Damn it, nothing!" He caught the latch and threw open the door. He went out and along the porch to the other end of the house.

Isabel was waiting. There was no light in her room. She was standing by the window. Moonlight made her look paler. She started when he came in. He stood looking at her. Outside, somewhere, there was a hard swishing noise that came again and again. He realized it was shovels, digging Galt's grave. He tried to shut it out. He tried to hear nothing but her voice.

"They believe you, Del?"

"Yeah, they believed me."

He crossed the room; he could see her eyes; some of the fear had gone out of them; some of the mockery had come back.

"What'd you tell them?"

"That I was going to be Bourgeois. That you and I were going to be married . . ."

"What!" Her eyes widened. Her lips seemed very red and moist. "As if I would marry a man like you! As if . . ." His hands had caught her wrists so she could not scratch, and now he was bending the arms behind her, gently, firmly, all the while she struggled and kicked. She started to bite when he kissed her. She didn't. Her lips opened. Her arms relaxed and then came up and around his neck, tight and straining . . .

The whole time he kept hearing the swish of those shovels.

V

IT RAINED. All summer long, that was about the only thing it did. The Fort wallowed in waterlogged silence. Trappers wandered in and out of Coffin's bar. Indians hung around the compound, looking for whiskey handouts. The sun came out, brief and white hot. The sun went in; the heat stayed. It kept raining. Summer crawled to an end.

Del stood at the gate, smoking. He stared at the yellow wash of plain grass beyond the Fort; his eyes were tired and empty-looking. Men passed and called him M'sieu le Bourgeois. He nodded absently or spoke. He sighed, dropping the cigaret in the mud. He swore softly and went on staring.

Jed was right. More and more, lately, the idea came to him. He was getting used to it. He never spoke of it, but it was always there, talking to him inside his brain. Jed was right. This was the real lonesome. This sitting around and standing around and living easy with people all about you. This being bored with all the nagging details of Company business, with the petty grudges of jealous La Bruges and Ides. His eyes strained toward the horizon where the Yellowstone spilled away into a soft blur. He recalled the freedom of the river, the swift current carrying mackinaws into clean, new country; he hummed a fragment of an old trapper's song; he smiled vaguely, almost able to smell the brown tang of firesmoke in the open stillness. A man could be free, out there; he could feel the excitement of newness stir in him; there were no niggling details, no mixed-up small thoughts, no worry or doubt. No Isabels . . .

He stopped short. The smile went away. Funny, wasn't it? A man about to be married, thinking that way? Sure. Funny as hell. He swore again and frowned. It was this waiting; it gave a man too much thinking time. There must be a decent spell between Galt's death and their marriage. That had been Isabel's idea. She was always having ideas, he thought. Well, this one had backed up. Time was confusing; it lay heavy on you and you got too conscious of this loneliness among too many people. Pretty soon, the only time you forgot it was when she was there, and you could feel her cool skin against your lips. Now, those times did not come as often as they had in the beginning. He had a pestering notion that maybe the waiting had been bad for her, too . . .

He didn't speak when Taylor came along.

He looked at the square face, nodded briefly and turned away. He did not know exactly why, but he didn't feel easy with Jed anymore. The quiet eyes were too steady on him. When Jed was near, the words in his head got louder. Jed was right, maybe this ain't what I want. Jed was right. He blinked, trying not to hear the words. Taylor leaned against the gatepost and said gently:

"I see Popa and her squaws are readying the feast."

"Yeah." Dell nodded. "Isabel's set on tomorrow for the wedding."

Jed filled a clay pipe and sucked its stem clear. He lit up. He did not look at London when he asked:

"And Tawn?"

"I talked to Tawn." Del kept his voice calm; it wasn't easy. "She knows how it is."

Taylor drew on the pipe.

"They're not all like Tawn," he murmured. "She's staying clear of the Fort. She thinks Isabel will like it better that way. She knows you want what Isabel wants." A smile had softened his mouth; it shadowed. "She's sick, Del. Funny what love can do to a woman. She don't say anything but she ain't the same. Her people don't like it. Black Hand keeps mumbling. He talks too much with La Bruge."

Del turned. His eyes came level with Taylor's and stayed that way.

"Get one thing straight, Jed. I marry whoever I damn please. Black Hand or no Black Hand."

He stopped. He could see her over Jed's shoulder. She walked carefully, holding her petticoats away from the mud on her delicate boots. A summer at the Fort had not changed the paleness of her skin; her face was calm, with half-veiled eyes; she looked bored and angry at the nasty mud. The heat did not keep her from being as coolly beautiful as ever. The idea somehow annoyed London. If she would just sweat, he thought; it would be more human . . . Isabel's voice came to him, low and easy.

"I told the tailor you'd be over for a last fitting, Del. He said he'd be in Coffin's, waiting. I do hope he'll have the suit done by tomorrow."

"It'll be done," London said.

She had stopped looking at him. Her eyes moved to Taylor; some of the boredom and fretfulness went out of them. She smiled.

"Hello, Jed."

Taylor didn't smile back. He lifted his hat and said flatly: "Afternoon, Ma'am." He looked at London. "I got things to do, Del. See you around."

"Yeah," Del said. "Sure."

Isabel's smile stayed in place; but now, it looked artificial. Taylor nodded and went off across the compound toward the Bourgeois house. Isabel swung burning eyes to Del. He laughed, gently.

"Jed ain't easy to impress, honey. He thinks you're bad for me."

The smile worked with anger, then went deliberately coquettish.

"Am I?" Her fingers locked at the back of his neck. "Sometimes I wonder if you think so, too."

He didn't answer. He laughed again. This time it didn't sound so real. He kissed her on the cheek, and patted her arm.

"The tailor'll be waiting for me."

He left her and walked in the direction of Coffin's bar. For a time, Isabel did not move. The old light of daring mockery had edged aside the boredom in her proud eyes. But, they did not follow Del. They stared steadily at the Bourgeois house.

THE bar was hot and dark. The doors, swinging shut behind London, stirred muggy air briefly. A few men were playing billiards in the corner. The balls clicked coolly. The men looked at Del. A couple nodded and spoke. That was all. Of a sudden, the room had gone quiet. Behind the bar, Tom Coffin filled a glass; the whiskey splashed nervously when he caught sight of Del. La Bruge and Black Hand stood at the end of the bar; they had been talking; they stopped. Black Hand's pocked face was flat and stony. The eyes were black needles digging into London. Del's gaze swung across the room; the tailor was a little Frenchman with a big whiskey; he sat at a wall table. Del started toward him.

"London."

Black Hand's voice was as hard as his eyes. Del stopped. He did not turn.

"Want talk with you," Black Hand said.

The men by the billiard table racked up cues and looked uneasy. They didn't like the sour grin that had begun playing with La Bruge's thick lips.

"All right." Del turned. "Talk."

The Arickaree chief came around the bar; his moccasins made padding sounds on the floor. He got close enough for London to smell the whiskey on his breath. London waited. The words squeezed through the slit of Black Hand's mouth.

"Hear talk. Much talk Bourgeois marry white squaw tomorrow."

Del said: "It's not just talk."

The bead-like eyes narrowed. "What of sister to Black Hand?"

"Tawn understands."

"It is not only Tawn. It is her people. They thought she marry white Bourgeois."

La Bruge slammed the bar with a massive fist; his bloodshot eyes glared at Del.

"It's an insult to a princess of the tribe!"

London only stared. The Frenchman looked away. Del said quietly to the Indian: "This thing is between Tawn and me. It's nobody else's business."

Deliberately, he turned his back on Black Hand. He walked toward the tailor's wall table, passing a timber upright. He had gone only a few steps when someone gasped. He felt a small slice in the air near his head. Black Hand's hunting knife buried its point in the upright; the blade quivered and was still. The Arickaree spoke in that same toneless voice.

"Black Hand chief of many braves. Black Hand say war, brave follow. Much blood. Many scalps. White scalps with fair hair."

Del's hand was steady; it reached out and pulled the blade free. He turned. Black Hand had not moved. La Bruge leaned his big elbows on the bar; he was grinning again. London walked back to where the Indian stood. He extended the knife, hilt-first. He said:

"Stop listening to bad talk, Black Hand. You know I work for the good of your people. Stop listening to the talk of men that'd do anything to make trouble for me. Because, if trouble comes, it won't hurt just me. It'll hurt you and your tribe."

Black Hand took hold of the knife and stared at it. For a minute no one seemed to move. Then, Del looked at the tailor.

"We better get that fitting done with. I want the suit ready by noon, tomorrow. The wedding'll be at sundown."

He went out; the doors swung silently; after a moment, the little tailor hurried

after him. La Bruge swore deep in his throat. The room breathed again. Over by the billiard table a man laughed nervously. He stopped when Black Hand's seething eyes turned on him sharply. Nobody echoed the laugh.

THERE was a sign over the bar in Fort Unity that said in crooked letters: *Thos. Coffin, prop., Also Justice of Peace & Burieing Done Cheape.* At the moment, Coffin was not a barkeep or undertaker. He was justice of the peace and dressed for the occasion. His black swallowtail coat had turned greenish at the seams; his shirt was not clean; the string tie was greasy. Coffin needed a shave and his lips looked wet with tobacco-juice and the dregs of a final shot. He was ready for the wedding ceremony.

So was the rest of the Fort. The squaws had put on their ball-gowns. Some of the trappers had taken the tobacco-plugs out of their jaws. Popa had done the Bourgeois house proper. No fur decoration had been forgotten. Fresh ribbon was tied maypole-fashion from the center of the room to the corners. The men hung around the punchbowl. Crow and Arickaree stood about with arms folded. Their faces were empty and sullen. Even the prospect of free whiskey didn't brighten them. Taylor stood beside Del, by Coffin's makeshift altar. They looked at each other.

"I don't like it," Jed whispered. "I don't like the way those bucks stare at Isabel. I've seen hate in their eyes before."

"Forget it. They like her. You're the one hates her. I don't see it, Jed. You won't give her a break. She tries to be your friend."

"Oh, sure." Taylor's voice was hoarse. "She tries, all right."

Del looked at him sharply; he did not get a chance to ask the question. Somebody coughed and Coffin said solemnly, "Gentlemen," and over in his corner, the fiddler scraped into the wedding march. Isabel came in slowly, each move practiced. The gown was white satin and perfect. Del had a vague notion the gown was the reason she had delayed the wedding. They had waited all summer because a gown had to be shipped from St. Louis, not out of respect for the dead. The thought turned his lips in a crooked smile. He wiped it off. She was there beside him, pale and cool, and Coffin had begun to talk.

The rough voice ran through the room; Jed Taylor did not listen to it. He looked slowly from one gown to the next, then stopped. A glint of mauve caught his eye. Tawn was at the rear of the crowd. Her soft brown skin was flushed; there was worry in her eyes. They seemed to be searching for someone she could not find. She was not listening, either. Frowning, Taylor edged to her side.

"Where's Black Hand?" he said close to her ear.

The worried expression deepened; her teeth bit into her lower lip. She shook her head. "I don't know . . ."

Jed's mouth tightened; Coffin droned on; the Indians studied Isabel's pale image without blinking. Their faces did not show anything. Taylor glanced about quickly, and then the uneasiness he had felt since early morning jelled abruptly, and he knew the reason for it. Black Hand wasn't the only one missing. La Bruge was gone. He felt Tawn half-turn to him. Her voice was trembling.

"Jed, you think . . .?"

"No. It's all right." He tried to make the smile convincing. "Don't worry. Everything's fine."

The place was suddenly quiet. He realized Coffin had stopped. Through bobbing heads he could see Del kissing his wife. The fiddle broke out, rash and shrill, and then everybody was talking and piling around the bride and groom. The Indians stayed in the background, watching. Taylor moved in with the crowd. There was a lot of laughter. Trappers had formed a line to kiss the bride. Somebody guffawed and pulled Jed into it. There was nothing he could do but wait his turn.

Up close, she was even more delicate and white. He could feel blood pounding in his ears. He was conscious of Del smiling and a smell of lavender that he wanted to get free of. He bent stiffly and kissed her cheek. The laugh was far down in her throat and warm. "Your friend's so bashful, Del!" And then, her arms were around his neck; she kissed him on

the mouth, hard. Trappers whistled and hooted. Del kept smiling; it seemed to Jed the smile wasn't real anymore. He wondered if her eyes had been that way for Del, deep and burning with mockery under their cool lids.

"Allrightee, ladies and gents!" He was no longer Justice of the Peace; he was the caller of the hoedown and Thos. Coffin, prop. "All-l-rightee! The first reel! Grab your partners and one and two and here we go!"

The fiddle screeched; men whirled and yahooed; dusky squaws flirted and teased and said no. Del and Isabel swung with abandoned grace at the center of the floor. Jed went to the table and got a double shot; he gulped hard, watching Tawn dance with a French-Canadian trapper. Her lips were smiling; her eyes had a faraway, lonely look. Taylor cursed under his breath, grabbed the hand of an Indian girl and whirled, angrily laughing, into the heart of the spinning mob. Coffin bawled and sweated and swilled. The fiddle squalled an endless repetitious tune. They danced.

"FIRE!"

They thought it was a joke; a half-stewed trapper laughed too loud. Then, a squaw screamed and pointed to the night sky beyond the doorway; it glowed orange. A frantic breed burst through the crowd, yellow, "M'sieu London! Fire! Fire in the foodstores!" Men let out a string of curses. People piled into the muddy open of the compound.

Del and Jed were in the lead. They stopped by the flagstaff, staring at the wall of flame that stretched halfway across the eastern end of the stockade. Heat came back in blistering waves. Women screamed. Isabel's gown looked russet in the fireglow; her face was empty and afraid, and childishly annoyed. Men were running wild, grabbing up skin sacks, and empty kegs to form a bucket-brigade, swinging up from the river through the wide-flung Fort gate. London yelled over the flame-roar: "The storehouse logs are rain-soggy. They'll burn fair slow. But, once she reaches the kegs and sacking and grain inside, she'll go up like sunned prairie grass!" Jed nodded and ran up and down the bucket line, keeping it moving. Water splashed. Women joined the brigade, their gowns splotched with muck. Isabel huddled in the protection of the porch. The flames leapt higher.

"No good!" London cried. "She's spreading too fast! That wall'll have to be blown out."

"We can't get close enough." Jed shielded his face against the heat. "Who's going to carry powder close to that hellfire?"

Del looked at him, then winked. "You and me?"

The men waited. A harsh laugh broke Taylor's lips. "You and me!"

It did not take long. Trappers made a rude shield out of watersoaked rawhide; Del and Jed wrapped themselves in wet sacking. The little man that brought the powder keg kept praying in French. Jed looked at Del; they hefted the open keg. "Right?" Del nodded. "Right." It got quiet; you could hear the heavy eating bellow of the fire. They went in very slowly, behind the shield. Somebody yelled: "For God's sake, not too close!" They kept going. They stopped within four yards of the flames. They moved swiftly, now, spilling powder in a line from right to left, the length of the storehouse wall. They set the keg down, spun and ran. They were barely clear of danger when Del yelled: "Let her rip!"

A tall skinny trapper shouldered a rifle, drew bead on the keg and squeezed the trigger. It went up with a roaring billow of black smoke. The ground shook. The thunder tumbled to silence. Wood fragments fluttered earthward; the soot cleared; the flames had withered to a ground-crawling snake. Water buckets had it out in five minutes. A wild cheer went up from the men. Del slapped Jed on the shoulder. They looked at each other and laughed.

"We'll have to build a new wall," Taylor said. "But, at least, Black Hand's little bonfire didn't get to the grub."

"A drink!" somebody shouted. "I say let's have a shot to the Bourgeois and his sidekick!"

The cheer went up again. Men started to pile London toward Coffin's bar.

"Del."

They came up short. The smile had left Jed Taylor's eyes; they moved swiftly

from one face to the next, then swung to London.

"It's Tawn. She was here when the fire broke out. She's gone."

Del's lips straightened. A disturbed mutter went through the men, and at the back of the crowd, a scratchy voice kept saying, "Let me through, I got to see London, let me . . ." A round, red-faced man broke into the open a few feet from Del and Jed. He was puffing hard! he was Kincaid, the Fort doctor. Long fingers plucked nervously at his string tie.

"You was asking about Tawn . . ."

Del stiffened; in a stride, Taylor was next to Kincaid. His hand clutched the fat shoulder.

"You know where she is?"

Kincaid's jowls shook when he nodded.

"I tried to stop her. I told her you wouldn't want her to. But . . ."

"Get it out, man," London snapped. "Where is she?"

"She said the fire was only the beginning."

Kincaid mopped sweaty soot from his face. She said she knew Black Hand and that devil, La Bruge, the way he kept giving her bucks whiskey to play his side. Somebody had to stop them before they came here on a hair-lifting party. She said maybe they'd listen to her . . . I tried to stop her. There was a pony by the gate . . ."

Nobody spoke. The men had forgotten about Coffin's bar. Their faces were flat and cold. After a minute, Del said quietly:

"They'll attack before sunup. They always work at night. Close those gates. We'll make a firing line along the top of the stockade. We'll need every gun we got."

The trappers nodded and muttered; squaws followed their men to different houses; men went to the north blockhouse for powder and shells. Del and Jed started toward the catwalk along the upper stockade wall. Isabel's voice stopped them. London turned at the sound of his name. He looked like a man who had just remembered an annoying detail. He walked to the porch of the Bourgeois house.

Isabel was pale as her gown. Fury darkened her eyes; she bit her lip like a spoiled child.

"This is a fine way to spend a wedding-night; I must say."

Del kept his tone gentle. "You best go indoors. There'll be gunplay; it won't be pretty."

"Dell." Taylor was at his elbow. "We ain't got all night . . ."

Isabel's eyes flashed. "You stay out of this! What right . . . ?"

"Get indoors and stay there," London told her.

He nodded at Jed; they started off. Isabel's voice had gone shrill.

"If you leave me, now, Del London, I . . ."

Del twisted sharply.

"If I don't leave you, now, you'll have your hair lifted before daylight."

Her face went a shade paler, and then flushed; the eyes brightened; it was as if the hint of violence excited some wild instinct buried under her civilized shell. He had first seen that look the night Galt's men had beaten him; now, he turned from it. He said, "All right," to Jed. They walked toward the stockade. He did not like the memory of that look in her eyes.

VI

IT WAS A business of waiting. Dank night air sifted feebly through the compound. Beyond the Fort, shadows shifted on the waving grass. A fine rain began to fall. A cougar screeched somewhere in the hills. That was all. The men crouched on the catwalk, stiff with damp and cold. Their legs felt numb. Somebody said tightly: "Why the hell don't they come?" Nobody answered. None of them moved. Men sweated a chilled sweat that was not from being too warm. Anxious fingers checked and rechecked loaded rifles. Del and Jed paced the walk silently; once, the kid with yellow greasy hair dozed over his gun. London shook his shoulder and grinned kindly. "Sleeping scalps is easiest to lift, laddiebuck."

The kid grinned back and tightened hold on the rifle. The wind whispered. Passing Del, Jed muttered: "I should've gone after her . . ." London shook his head. "Tawn can take care of herself. Anyhow, Black Hand wouldn't hurt her." Taylor nodded; he didn't look convinced.

The cold settled in with the midnight mist. Men coughed and swore. A dark cloud blot, passing the moon, swung across the fields beyond the stockade. Trappers started, aimed, then relaxed with uneasy laughs. Then, abruptly, softly, the cry came along the catwalk line.

"Injun!"

Trigger-fingers tensed; men squinted along gunbarrels. The movement came from a low larch grove just west of the Fort. Figures came out of tree shadows and stood still, in a small tight knot. Then, deliberately, the Indians came on. The blond kid drew bead and said thickly, "What're we waiting for?" Del's hand came down on the smooth steel rifle barrel. "Hold it!" he ordered. "That ain't a war party." The men looked at him, then concentrated on the group of Indians that moved directly toward the Fort gate through weaving grass. There were five of them. Four braves followed Black Hand closely. They were unarmed. In the lead, the Arickaree chief walked with a cold, measured step. He carried something in his arms. They were only yards from the stockade, now. Wet moonlight gleamed on Tawn's mauve gown; Black Hand carried her easily. The men on the catwalk could see the dark stain on the left side of her bodice. Taylor caught Del's arm. A Mexican engage murmured: "Santa Maria!"

London said in a quiet voice: "Open the gate for them."

Men moved; the massive crossbar lumbered free of its socket. Without a word, the Indians came into the compound. Black Hand did not look at anyone. In his arms, Tawn was motionless. The Arickaree followed Del's nod and laid the girl on a skin-covered bench in the shadow of the bourgeois porch. London elbowed through the gathering, silent crowd. Light from the doorway fell across Tawn where she lay. The stain at her side stood out clearly, its edges drying dark, the center wet and bright red with blood that still came. Jed stood beside her; he looked numb. London waved a hand.

"Kincaid . . . "

The fat form pushed to Del's side. Kincaid looked at the girl, then went to her. Nobody spoke. A shadow drew itself in the doorwy; Isabel stared at the redness of Tawn's side; she watched the Doctor's fingers probe the wound gently, and come away stained. She did not pale; that look was in her eyes again. London looked away from her.

He asked the Doctor: "Bad?"

Kincaid's red face was stiff. He only nodded. A taut mutter went through the crowd. Somewhere an Indian woman was crying. The Arickaree braves had not moved; neither had Black Hand. Del turned to face him square; his eyes asked the question.

The Indian said flatly: "La Bruge."

The mutter went up a notch to anger. Somebody mumbled: "The rat."

"How?" London asked.

"La Bruge set fire to foodstore," the Indian answered. "Tell us attack when fire keep you busy." The black eyes gentled when they touched the girl on the couch. "I thought . . . for Tawn . . . Not true. La Bruge want Arickaree to kill for him. So he can be Bourgeois. Tawn know this. Ride to stop attack. He saw her go from Fort. Catch her in hills; he use knife and leave her for dead. But, she reach us . . . tell us . . ." The mouth stiffened. "I bring here here for white medicine."

Del nodded. Taylor's face was a dark mask.

"Where is he now?"

A sour smile seamed Black Hand's face.

"Many brave trail; trap him, now, in hills to north. One man must go into get him."

Taylor straightened; fingers brushed the butt of his Colt. He did not get a chance.

London said evenly: That's my job."

"No . . . Dell . . ." Tawn's voice was just a whisper of breath. Her hand reached out weakly. London took it. "Don't go, Del . . . La Bruge is not a man. Only a bear." Her mouth twisted with pain. There was cold sweat on her forehead. She managed a thin smile. "A bear . . . with long, long claws . . . Del, he'll hurt you."

Kincaid said in a gentling tone: "You best stop talking now, Missy . . ."

London patted the damp, cold hand. You don't let wild bears run loose, honey. You kill them. . . . I'll be all right.".

He stood erect; the smile went away. His eyes had caught Isabel's; they were not like Tawn's. There was no worry in

them; only that tantalizing excitement. Del turned abruptly to Taylor, nodding toward Tawn. "Somebody ought to stay with her." Jed didn't say anything. A trader came up to London. "The roan's waiting at the gate." London nodded. Black Hand said quietly: "One of my braves show you trail." Del did not look at Isabel again. He and the Arickaree buck walked quickly toward the gate. They had another pony for the Indian. The hoofbeats died slowly in wet stillness. Attention swung back to Tawn. Nobody noticed the horseman who left the Fort five minutes later. Jed had no trouble trailing London.

THE PASS lay between two wooded hills; its sheer walls pressed in narrowly. If a man followed the pass maybe a quartermile, he came to a dark pocket; just ahead lay a third wall. It was a dead end. With the hills surrounded he could not get out; but he had a perfect ambush; he could pick off anyone who came after him. La Bruge was holed up in that pocket.

Daylight was a cold iron band along the horizon. Black Hand's men stood motionless at spaced posts along the shadowed base of the hills. They were armed to the teeth. London and the Arickaree had reined in close to the mouth of the Pass. They stared into its misted darkness. On the ridge above a wolf howled at the coming day. The Indian pointed to the blue-green shades of the hill-woods.

"Many men could go over hill, into pocket. But, hilltop is bare. In open, they make good target for La Bruge. Never get to him. But, one man, through pass . . . maybe . . . "

Del only nodded. He checked the Colt; it was loaded. He did not put it back in the holster.

"I seen enough of Moffats and Tawns," he said softly.

Nobody answered. The Indians watched him from their posts. He went forward at an even pace. He didn't crouch. His boots made a small sound in the mud. The black hole of the pass swallowed him. They stood, waiting, listening. A jackrabbit skittered across the shale-littered floor of the pass. London tensed. Nothing more. He went on. The shadows were paling to a blue fog. Cold morning sun did not touch the pass. Sweat made the gun slippery in Del's grasp. The pass sank underfoot and widened slightly; he felt as if he had been walking for hours. Suddenly, somewhere ahead, a pony nickered. London stopped dead, flattening against the wall. La Bruge had ridden into his ambush; it had to be around the next turn. Del clicked back the Colt-hammer; he took a step . . .

"All right, La Bruge! Come and get it!"

The cry was wild and raw, tearing down into the ravine from the crest on London's right. Del twisted and stared up. Jed Taylor stood just outside the screen of the woods; he was a clay pigeon, perched on the barren pate of the hill. He let out a hoarse Indian yell and came forward deliberately, making himself a target. He fired; an answering shot belched from the dark pocket. Taylor let out a mocking laugh. Del could hear La Bruge cursing. It came in a volley, then, one shot on the heel of the last, and earth kicking up in wild puffs inches from Jed. It was the fifth slug that creased a burning line along his ribs and spun him crazily. He dropped to his knees. At the same moment, London broke into the clearing. La Bruge twisted and squeezed the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

The echo of the shots withered. There was nothing but stillness. La Bruge stared at the gun dully. His eyes switched to Del. The muzzle of London's colt was trained on his chest. The thick lips warped and fell open. A thin smile bent one corner of Del's mouth. He did not fire. His voice was too quiet.

"You won't need the gun, La Bruge. A knife was good enough for Tawn . . . Try it on me."

London tossed the Colt into the brush behind him. Fingers clamped on the hilt of his hunting knife. La Bruge's eyes seemed very s m a l l and burning. The sound that came from his throat was more animal than human. His hand went to his belt and came away. The blade of his knife was still stained with dried blood. They circled, warily. London could hear the Frenchman's t h i c k breathing. The smile didn't leave his lips. La Bruge's roar went shrill as he dove. Del caught the wrist of the slashing knife-hand; they

crashed back against the wall. His own knife-hand was free; he tried to bring it up into La Bruge's gut. The trader swerved; his fist slammed into Del's temple. London sprawled; massive hulk crushed down on him. La Bruge's knife rose and fell; he could feel cold metal graze the fleshy part of his shoulder. The blade buried itself to the hilt in the sodden ground. Before La Bruge could free it, Del made his move; his knee came up brutally; he could feel the thick midsection buckle. Wind burst from the Frenchman's mouth. He rolled over.

Del was on his feet; his arm felt a little numb from the shoulder wound. He switched the knife to his good hand. La Bruge had gained hands and knees. Del's grin got tighter. Deliberately, he closed in and brought the knee up again. It cut into the heavy jowl. La Bruge spilled backward. London was on top of him. He brought the knife down; the iron fingers caught his wrist; his face was very close to La Bruge's; he could feel the tendons of his own neck standing out. He could smell foul breath.

He put all his weight on the knife. Its point was only an inch from La Bruge's swollen throat. It drove downward, slowly, relentlessly; the flesh gave and burst; he felt blood on his hand and the blade scraping against windpipe as it plunged home. Under him, La Bruge lunged; he held the knife steady; there was a wet sound in La Bruge's throat. The whites of his eyes showed. He went limp. Afterward, once or twice, the huge form twitched. Only that. It did not take him long to die.

Del swayed and swallowed air; his breathing got easier. He wiped the blood from his knife with a fistful of grass. He picked up the Colt and put it in his holster. He went out along the pass; he did not look back. The band in the sky had widened and turned a dirty yellow. He could see the Arickaree and Jed at the mouth of the Pass, waiting. Nobody said anything. Jed was already in the saddle. His right arm was in a sling, but the cut in his side had stopped bleeding. London mounted and nodded. They hit out South toward the Fort. Del spoke only once. His eyes were steady on Taylor. "I wouldn't have had a chance, alone. Thanks." The square of Jed's face softened. "We always worked together, before. I reckon this was no different." They rode on in easy silence.

Fort Unity stirred in the sleepy morning; some of the trappers at Coffin's bar asked questions; Del answered them quietly. The Doctor finished with Taylor, and worked over the knife-slice in London's shoulder. The men watched. Del swallowed a shot and looked at Kincaid.

"How's Tawn?"

The red face bobbed. "Coming right along. But she wants to go mighty easy-like. Knife dug deep; grazed the left lung. Take a long spell healing right. Any rough movement could cause hemorrhage."

Del buttoned his shirt; he turned to Jed. Taylor said quietly:

"Isabel'll be waiting . . . "

London's head moved up and down; his eyes were empty. You could not tell whether the idea pleased him or not. He went out. Jed stared at the doors swinging idly behind Del. He asked the Doctor:

"Where is she?"

Kincaid took him to a room over the bar; it was dim and smelled of medicine. There was a squaw sitting in attendance by the iron bed. She moved so Jed could get closer. By candlelight, Tawn's face looked pale in spite of natural bronze. Taylor's fingers touched the hand that lay outside the Indian blanket. The head moved on its pillow. Tawn murmured:

"Del . . . ?"

"Easy, honey . . . It's Jed . . . "

Her eyes opened; they didn't see the black sling that held his arm; they didn't see the blood caked on his shirt. They went beyond him, staring at fear. The dry lips parted.

"Del . . . ?"

Jed's mouth went taut; hurt darkened his eyes. He managed a smile.

"It's all right, Tawn. It's all over . . . Del's fine . . . "

That was all that mattered. The fear went away. Tawn's head pressed comfortably into the pillow. She closed her eyes and smiled and repeated it, softly, like a prayer. "Del . . . "

He sat with her until she went to sleep again. Then, he went down the stairs and to the bar and asked for a bottle and a glass. His mouth was still set and sadly

bitter. He wanted to stop thinking. He wanted to get drunk.

VII

THE AUTUMN wind was dry and sharp, raising gritty puffs along the packed earth of the compound. Dusk settled in early; the lamps in Coffin's saloon were already lit; windows threw yellow blotches across the shadowy porch. Inside, there was loud laughter and drinking. Trappers had on red bandanas and calico shirts with Indian beadwork; some of them stitched the split seams of buckskin breeches. They talked; it was free, lively talk, about the trail and what had happened last year and might happen this. Fort Unity had come alive; the summer died and men squirmed out of boredom and looked across jaundiced plains to the wilderness of the upper Yellowstone.

Tomorrow, the huge packs of flour, and lyed corn and coffee would be hefted on ready shoulders; at dawn a Trading party would set out north, along the swirling river; there would be singing and hearty goodbyes and jokes. There would be lust for life and happiness.

Outside Coffin's, Jed Taylor leaned against the hitching-post. He frowned at the tip of his cigaret. He did not look at Kincaid.

He said softly: "I don't know, Doc."

"I tell you, Jed, little Missy's going to be all right. Just the wound heals slow-like."

Taylor shook his head. "She looks awful peaked. Like maybe she'll never get better."

For a time, Kincaid did not say anything. He knocked out his cob pipe. His fat face had gone serious.

"Funny thing about people," he muttered. "Seems as how, sometimes, they just don't care none about getting better." He sighed. "There's other kinds of sickness, Jed. It ain't always the body."

"I know." Taylor nodded. "I know, Doc."

The men in the bar were singing, loud and unmusical. Jed dropped his cigaret in the dust, and watched its smoke ribbon sift upward. Finally, he said:

"Maybe I better let somebody else take this party. Maybe I shouldn't leave."

"Nobody says you got to . . . "

"No . . . " Taylor's eyes swung across the compound to the lighted windows of the big house. "Nobody says so . . . But I reckon I do."

There was a question in Kincaid's round face. Jed didn't answer it. He trod out the cigaret-butt and nudged the Doctor's shoulder gently.

"Well . . . See you, Doc. The Londons are waiting grub for me."

"Sure," Kincaid mumbled. "See you." His eyes followed Jed across the dusk-dimmed clearing. The question was still in them.

Taylor walked slowly. He opened the door like a man who didn't want to. The candlelight was brilliant; it winked on the glass candelabra Isabel had brought up from St. Louis. They were waiting for him; Del grinned and said it was about time he got there, the grub was getting cold. The table was set with expensive linen and silver. Jed wasn't looking at the table.

He could see the cool paleness of Isabel's throat and shoulders, left naked by the lowcut dinner gown. She laughed and came toward him, and he could hear the echo of her laugh, pounding warmly inside his head. Loneliness welled in on him; he wanted a drink. When she took his hand, her palm was hot against his.

"A feast," she said brightly. "You see, Jed. I've made a farewell feast for the voyager."

He tried a smile; he knew it wasn't real; he was too conscious of the soft burning fingers in his. It was that way the whole time they ate; he could not taste the food; the St. Louis wine had no tang on his tongue. Vaguely, he heard Del's talk, coming to him through the mockery of her smiling eyes that kept meeting his across the table. He could not get the secret scent of lavender out of his nostrils. He was glad when it was over. They came out to the porch with him. Del glanced up at the yellow square of a window above Coffin's bar. He had been laughing; he stopped and looked at Jed.

"How is she?"

"I don't know. Doc says all right. But, I don't know."

"Look, Jed . . . I could get another leader for this party."

Taylor's eyes moved slowly from Del to Isabel; she was not smiling, but the warm taunt was still in her eyes. He looked away and shook his head.

"I got to get away . . . from . . . all of it . . . Maybe, out there, things'll be right again."

Nobody spoke. After a time, Del said: "Out there, things're always clearer."

His eyes were faraway and restless. They followed the moonlight shifting across distant hills. They caught the wink of a remembered campfire; he could smell dusty, burning leaves and see a mackinaw knifing through tumbled white rapids, loaded with the scent of furs and sweating man-flesh. He smiled. Jed's voice brought him back.

"I best be turning in, now. We start at sunup."

They said goodnight. Del and Taylor shook hands. Jed didn't look at Isabel again.

He went quickly across the compound and through Coffin's swinging doors. Del did not move. The reminiscent smile kept doing tricks with his lips. He had forgotten Isabel. She leaned against the porch-rail; the softness had gone out of her face. Her eyes grew narrow studying the pale smoky entrance of the Saloon.

It was a long while before she said, very softly:

"Del . . . "

"Mmm?"

"Why don't you go with the party?"

For a second, something more than surprise lightened his eyes. Then, he looked at her, the grin gone wry.

"Somebody has to run the Fort . . . Besides, I couldn't leave you alone."

"You won't be leaving me." Isabel came a step closer. "I'm going with you."

He laughed, but he did not say no. Her fingers caught his sleeve.

"Couldn't we, Del? Tell the truth! You're bored to death, here . . . You could leave someone in charge."

He took her shoulders gently. "You really want to?"

"I want what you want . . . " She kissed him lightly. They laughed.

"You know, lady, sometimes I think you love me."

"Sometimes?"

THE MOCKERY was just right; warm and tender, like her body against his. Over his shoulder, her eyes stayed on the batwing doors through which Jed had gone. She smiled.

Del let go of her. "We'll have to move fast. I'll go tell Jed he can expect company."

She nodded and said something about packing a few things. He laughed like a kid the day school lets out, and went across the clearing at an easy sprint. His wife stood there, smiling. The smile wasn't for him.

Coffin's bar was almost empty; a half-breed barfly sprawled across one of the tables, passed out. There were broken bottles on the floor and someone had written Bon Voyage with candlewax on the mirror behind the bar. The party was over; most of the trappers had turned in, laughing and arguing with liquor-warmth in their bellies. Tom Coffin leaned against the polished oak, rubbing clean glasses with a soiled towel. Jed Taylor was at the far end of the bar; there was a four-finger whiskey jigger in front of him; he tilted a bottle, filling the glass for the third time. He saw London coming. He made no sign. He downed the drink and stood staring at Del. London slapped his shoulder and reached behind the bar for a glass.

He poured one and said: "I've got news for you, mister."

"Don't tell me." Jed's words were thickened with whiskey. "You're going with us. You and . . . her."

Del's grin got less sure; it stayed in place. "That's it. How'd you know?"

Jed spat out a sour laugh and glared at his empty glass. "Oh, I got inside information. You want to watch me, Del. I'm an inside man. Always work from the inside."

London had the drink halfway to his lips; he set it down again; the smile was gone. Jed turned and met the steady gaze; his mouth twisted and tightened and then broke open.

"Don't do it, Del. It can't work out. You want to join the party, all right. Only don't let her come; no matter what she says. She won't fit. There's something clean and fine out there. Don't let her dirty it."

A fist caught Taylor's shirtfront; the last words jolted out. Coffin had stopped polishing glasses; he looked worried. Slowly, London's grip relaxed. He took up his drink and gulped it. His voice was flat and hard.

"You ought to shy clear of liquor, mister. Makes you say things you don't mean."

Jed turned back to the bar; he stared at the wet circles made by glass-bottoms.

"Yeah," he said quickly. "Things I don't mean . . . "

He caught the bottleneck with a quick, vicious movement; he poured the fourth drink sloppily.

Del straightened. "See you at sun-up."

"Sun-up," said Taylor without looking at him.

London left.

Things got too quiet; you could hear the barfly snoring and the drip of a tap behind the bar. Coffin went and tightened the spigot. He came back, picked up the towel, and began buffing a new glass. He did not look at Jed. Taylor swallowed the drink and stared at the jigger. He bit his lip. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I warned him." The confused eyes turned on Coffin. "You heard me, Tom. Didn't I warn him? Didn't I say, 'Don't let her come' . . . ? But, no! He wouldn't listen . . . Whatever happens now, it won't be my fault . . . It won't will it, Tom?"

The barkeep shook his head. "Take it easy, Mister Taylor."

Jed's fist clamped hard on the whiskey glass. His mouth warped. He flung the jigger wildly. It splintered against the wall.

"Damn it, a man gets lonely! You can't have Tawn . . . you can't have a decent woman, you take the other kind. Don't he see? You can't fight that kind and win all the time! A man's only human."

The words broke in his throat. He shut his mouth tight. The muscles of his jaw knotted. He swallowed, and looked away from Coffin. After a while, he said in a low, controlled voice:

"Give me another glass, Tom . . . "

Coffin didn't say anything. He brought the glass. Jed filled it.

He drank.

A FOREBODING of trouble followed him. He had expected the old feeling of freedom in his chest once the stockade dropped behind. He had wanted to thrill to the surge of muddy rapids under the sliding keelboat. Once, he tried to join the men in their rowing song, but the words tasted dry and spiritless in his mouth. He had a feeling there was a strange uneasiness in the way the men sang; their laughter seemed forced; they looked too often toward Isabel; and when they looked, they did not smile.

Del told himself it was imagination. Everything was all right. Jed had relaxed by noon; he no longer sat stiff and silent in his end of the mackinaw. When Isabel asked a question about some passing sight, Jed answered, easily, with a half smile broadening his square jaw. Isabel was bright and pale, and no longer soft-looking in buckskin breeches and a cotton shirt that spanned her firm breasts. Her eyes flicked from one sight to the next with the bright interest of a cat watching prey. London thought: They'll get along. He didn't mean what he said at Coffin's. He was drunk. They'll come to know each other and everything'll be fine. Only he knew it wouldn't.

He was conscious of Ide; the way the breed's dark eyes followed him, the secret grin that curled thin lips, was part of the uneasiness that had taken hold of him. Somehow, nothing was what he had expected. Along the riverbanks, the trees seemed tense and waiting. Several times during the first day, he thought he glimpsed a shadow that moved somewhere, beyond the shield of river brush, something on land, trailing the quick passage of their boats. He wanted to believe it was a cloud-shadow; he looked away from Ide's irritating grin. Trouble, his mind muttered; and water washing against the keelboat sides echoed, trouble, trouble. And in the middle of the first night he woke abruptly with a taut feeling that he was being watched. Isabel lay across from him, rolled in her blanket; for a moment, he thought her eyes were open, staring at him. He said her name softly. She did not answer. He thought he must have dreamed it; but he had a hard time getting to sleep again. He kept remembering the cold steadiness of that gaze, like

the eye of a man looking down a gun-sight.

The Crow village lay four days to the north. The night of the third day, London's party struck camp in the clearing of a deserted trapper's cabin; by the light of fire from a broken-down hearth, Del and Taylor talked with scouts from the village. They gave free whiskey and got an invitation in return. In the morning the party moved on; the Crow scouts acted as guides. London was led to the lodge of the chief; sentries were stationed to guard his goods, and criers sprinted through the village, spreading news of the white trader's coming. By noon, trade was under way. Indians came, rubbing palm across palm, swallowing their gift liquor, and offering pelts in fair exchange for arrowhead-iron, guns, powder and flints, and new beaver and muskrat traps. Everything went off without a hitch.

It didn't make London feel any better. He was restless and sweating in the stink of the lodge. Sundown came and trade did not slacken. Noisy bucks still crowded at the lodge-entrance, bragging about whose skins were best. Del swore. At his side, dickering for marten pelts with a handful of gaudy beads, Ide's interest was not in the trade. He looked sidelong at London and said through that grin:

"Le Bourgeois could use more help with this business."

Del frowned. "I need a smoke," he said.

He went out through the elbowing mob of braves. The blue air of dusk was clean and sharp with a smell of snow. It should have cooled him. It didn't. The dampness on his palms was nervous sweat. He tried not to wonder why. He took a deep drag on the cigaret. When Ide came out, he didn't look around. He could feel the beaded eyes on him. There was a knot in his stomach. He knew he was waiting for something. It came. Ide said in a soft voice:

"We could handle trade easier with Taylor's help."

Del's shoulders stiffened. His thumb and forefinger snapped the cigaret in two. He turned, slowly, until he faced the breed.

"All right," he said. "Let's have it. Where is he?"

Ide's brows went up; it was a good act; he really looked surprised.

"M'sieu does not know?"

"You know damn well I don't!"

The breed shrugged; he couldn't keep that sarcastic grin from twitching his lips.

"A man mostly knows when his wife . . ."

The words trailed off suggestively; the grin got deeper. It jarred when London caught Ide's shirt at the collar. Del's face was hard and still in the dusk. He spoke without tone.

"Josh me once more and I'll break your neck."

He thrust Ide from him. The breed went back against the deerskin lodge wall and stayed there. The smile was gone; he felt his throat.

"All right!" Del snapped. "Spit it out."

"Last night," Ide said hoarsely. "The camp is asleep. I hear them talk. Jed . . . your wife . . . He is drunk, very drunk . . . They talk of meeting tonight . . . back there . . . in the trapper's cabin."

London's hand slashed across the thin mouth; he could hear himself breathing; he felt blood drumming in his ears. "You're lying," he said. "That's it, ain't it? . . . You're lying!"

Faintly, the smile retwisted the breed's lips. He didn't say anything. He just shook his head.

The babble of liquor-happy bucks came through the thin wall. Up the river a piece, a beaver slapped water with its tail. The sound was sharp, like the crack of a rifle on quiet air. Del stood still. His fingers closed on the butt of the low-slung Colt. Hate and anger had gone out of his eyes; they were cold, now, and stony. After a while, he said to Ide in a soft, decided voice:

"Saddle the roan for me."

VIII

THE SNOW made things worse. It came swiftly, driven by frost-bitten wind from the black northern sky; it blotted out the trail and made treacherous patches of ice and mud along the river-bank. The horse slithered and nearly lost footing. London swore; his eyes squinted against the white needles that ate into his face. The way was dark with shadow and

loneliness. There was a cold dull sickness inside him. He was conscious again of that feeling that he was being followed. Once, he stopped. He saw nothing behind him but snow and night. He rode on. The wind sighed through naked trees and it wasn't the wind, it was Ide's laughter, with the taunting words coming and going, endlessly. A man mostly knows when his wife . . . when his wife . . . his wife . . . A bitter twist caught Del's mouthcorner; very softly, he said, "The bitch." He prodded the roan onward.

It was not a bad cabin; some of the mud chinking had fallen from between the logs; there were tears in the oil-paper that did for windows. But, with a fire going inside, it would be warm and dimly secret. London dismounted at the tangled edge of the cabin clearing. He passed two ponies, tethered to a rotted sapling. One of them nickered. He did not walk carefully or crouch. He moved easily, erect. His feet made a soft whisper in snowy mud. His fingers hung just above the gunbutt. He didn't draw. He caught the latch between thumb and forefinger. The door opened inward; it creaked faintly.

There was no light but the darting glow of the fire. It made tall, uneasy shadows on the walls. Jed was standing by the ricketty-legged table in the corner; he had a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other; the glass was full. He had no shirt on; orange light wavered across the muscles of his chest. He looked at Del; there was a crooked smile on his wet lips; a little whiskey spilled from the corner of his mouth. He laughed hoarsely and waved the glass. Some of the liquor slopped over on his hand.

"Well! We got visitors! Come on in; join the crowd, Del; have a shot! Lots of men; that's what we want. The more men the merrier! Ain't you heard . . . ?" The glass waved toward the fireplace. "Your wife's crazy about men."

Del kept quiet; he looked tall and broad in the narrow doorway; he did not move. Neither did Isabel. She lay, leaning on one elbow, on a skin rug stretched before the hearth. The firelight was bright on her warm flesh; she did not have the buckskin clothes on; she held the shirt against her with one hand; it didn't hide much. Her pale hair was loose and long over her shoulders and one lock fell across the forehead. Her mouth was a little open; the teeth looked very white and small and predatory. There were tiny beads of sweat on her upper lip. London thought of a hound dog in heat. His jaws hardened. He did not return her slow, defiant smile.

"All right!" Jed wouldn't look at the strange victory in her eyes; he rocked on his heels, facing Del. He wasn't laughing anymore. The warped mask of his face wasn't pretty to see. "You came to kill me. Get it done with!"

London stared for a moment, then took a step into the dim room. A drop of melted snow slid off the edge of his hatbrim. He drew the Colt with a long, slow, sure movement. Isabel tensed; it wasn't fear; it was that challenging excitement, cold and animal, darkening her eyes again. She watched; her teeth were clamped tight; she was still smiling.

"I told you," Taylor said in a hollow voice. "I told you, Get rid of her. She'll hurt you . . . she'll hurt all of us."

London said, "Shut up."

It was very still; a log sagged in the fire; sparks went up. Isabel's fingers were clawed; she watched the gun-hammer click back; she waited. The shot didn't come. Jed didn't crumple and fall. There was nothing but silence. Then, she realized Del was not looking at Taylor. His gray gaze had swung to her; the eyes were smiling, a dead unamused smile. London said quietly:

"You'd like me to kill him, wouldn't you? Sure. That would give you a hell of a kick, one man gut-shooting another, for love of you." Del shook his head. "Well, it don't work that way, lady. He's not the one I want . . . I want you."

Isabel's mouth went uncertain; she looked unbelieving, and pale even in fireglow. She got to her feet, clutching the clothes against her. Her eyes never left London. She tried to keep the smile in place; it was a little lopsided.

"Del, it wasn't my fault . . ."

London was not hearing her; he took a step; she backed away; she was against the wall by the fireplace. The words came from Del in a soft, toneless flow.

"Jed warned me about you and your world. He was right. Oh, you're wild, all right. But, not like the wilderness I knew;

that was clean and honest. It killed to live. Your wilderness kills for the hell of it; because living bores you and death might be exciting. That's it, ain't it, Isabel? Boredom. You were bored with St. Louis, so you turned to Galt; only he didn't last long; you were bored with him the night I came back. So, I was the next goat. And, now, Jed . . . "

Taylor was standing quite still; he watched Isabel's lower lip tremble. He said thickly, "Del, you can't . . . "

London didn't stop watching his wife. The gentle monotone went on.

"I used to think the wilderness was lonesome . . . " He laughed a soundless laugh.

"I was wrong there, too. You live in the real lonesome, lady . . . with people all around you. A world full of men wanting things they can't have, and women that don't know what they want, and kill everything that gets in their way when they try to find it. That kind of wilderness backs up, Isabel. It ends by killing itself."

He was only three feet from her; he could catch the familiar scent of lavender. Isabel's knuckles were white with clutching the clothes so tightly; they weren't much between her and a bullet.

"ALL RIGHT," Del said. "Chalk up two. Galt and me. You got us. But, the last try went wild. You're not going to get Jed. I won't let you. He's going back where it's clean, and the cleanness ain't spoiled by greed and envy and ladies that play with fire just to keep from being bored." The gun came up level with her chest.

"They'll get me; I'm too tangled up to get free. But I can clear the way for Jed."

"Del, don't!" The excitement was still there; her eyes were still too bright; but now the soft mouth was out of shape and the excitement was fear that caught at the words in her throat. She flattened against the wall.

"You don't understand, Del. You've got to see. I wanted to make you jealous. I didn't care about him; just you and me, Del. Always, you and me. Forget Jed. We could go away, the two of us. I could make you forget; we could be happy."

The dry laugh came again; it stopped her.

"Go away with you?" London said. "And get a bullet in the head when you find the next boy that catches your fancy? No, thanks. I got no hankering to be Galt number two." The grin stretched into a straight humorless line. "You know, Isabel, they don't try to tame kill-crazy animals. They put a bullet through them. It's the only way."

He didn't get a chance to fire. The shots came from behind him, through the torn oil-paper of the window. They were a heavy rocking thunder that came again and again in the close shadows. At first, Isabel only looked surprised; the second shot pinned her against the wall; the others tore into the buckskin shield of her clothes. Her mouth opened and blood came out at one corner; red stained her fingers. The shots kept coming. When she fell forward, they could see particles of torn flesh and clothing smeared on the rough wall behind her. One hand reached out and the nails dug into the earthen floor. She moaned once and coughed. Her eyes glazed. She lay still.

London and Jed had not moved. The gun was cold and unsmoking in Del's grip. For a long moment, he stared at it; He realized he was listening, waiting for the sounds of escape outside the torn window, waiting to hear the mutter of retreating hoofs. It didn't come. He looked at Jed. They both stared at the window. There was nothing but the greasy paper, flopping stiffly in the wind. Taylor followed Del to the door. They went out slowly. They found Tawn lying in a small heap under the window. The gun was beside her.

She was breathing; that was all. The wound in her side had opened; the cotton blouse was clotted with dark red wetness. Her lips were without color. Jed knelt beside her; he lifted her shoulders gently; she winced. Her eyes opened a little; they focused on Jed, then moved slowly to London. The smile was faint, but it was there. Taylor shook his head. His voice was a thick whisper.

"She's been bleeding a long time . . . the wound's turning black." He looked at Del. "She must've been trailing us for days."

Inflation!

We think of our high prices of today as something peculiar to our changing times, but, in the early days of the Klondike Rush, prospectors had to pay $50 for a bushel of potatoes; $7 to $9 for a pound of ham or bacon, and the same for an egg. Butter was $25 a pound, and coffee cost $30. The first laborers could command $100 per day, and whisky was $75 a bottle; and, even if you had the money, you had to be lucky to find someone who had these items up for sale.

Del didn't speak; he remembered the shadow that followed the mackinaws north along the riveredge. He heard Jed say softly: "Tawn, you shouldn't have . . ." She wasn't looking at Taylor. Del could feel her eyes on him. She only breathed the words.

"It was the way things had to be. . . ."

There was more. There were words behind the faraway smile of her eyes, the kind of words nobody ever said because they were somehow too important to be spoken aloud. She knew; she knew that this had always been the only way for Del, for Jed. There were men who never belonged to women; they had another mistress and mother and bride. They had the wilderness that was part of them, and no woman could ever take its place. There were times when they ran away and thought they wanted something else; but they always returned. They got lost in worlds they never made, and someone had to show them the trail back to the clean, honest lonesome that, maybe, after all, was the one place where a man could be whole and untouched by the sickness of selfishness and boredom; where he could be free to think and hope and build and be what he was meant to be . . .

Pain shadowed away the words. Tawn stiffened in Taylor's arms and then, with a small sob, relaxed. Her hand reached out uncertainly toward Del. Jed didn't want to let her go; he wanted to hold her; he wanted to put his lips against hers; he didn't. He looked up at London. Del didn't say anything. He knelt on the other side of Tawn and took her in his arms. Her head rested against his shoulders; the lips were a little parted. Her eyes smiled; one hand touched his hair over the ear. He kissed her and for a moment, her mouth answered. Then, she sagged gently; her eyes were closed. He held her head against him. Neither he nor Jed spoke. The snow kept falling. A few white flakes settled on her parted lips. The dying warmth of her body melted them very slowly.

THEY stayed with her all night. They didn't talk. Once, Jed went off into the wood beyond the cabin clearing. He came back with a small fallen larch branch. He sat down again in the lee of the cabin wall. He worked slowly and with gentle care over the hard, damp wood. There was no sound but the soft scrape of his hunting knife. Sunup came cold and gradual out of the misted east. The snow had not stopped. The two men rose stiffly. They dug the graves side by side in the shade of a barren pine on the north edge of the clearing. It didn't take long. The bodies were small and lonely looking in their fur wrappings. They filled in the graves and stood there a moment, with their hats off. One grave was left unmarked. At the head of the other, Jed put the rude cross he had made; there were no dates or details, only the name carved deep in hard, dark wood. Jed settled the cross with a firm, gentle pressure and said, "There," in a soft voice. The way he said it, it sounded like a prayer.

Del got the horses; they rode one each and led the other two. They sat their ponies a moment, looking at the low mounds of fresh earth, then, Del nodded. He was tall and straight in the saddle, with the easy, strong straightness of a free man. They reined around and went north along the river trail. Once, they turned, but the grove of snowy trees had already closed in behind them; they did not look back again. In the cabin clearing, snow slowly coated the darkness of the graves and blotted out the tracks of men and horses. An elk edged through the brush at the clearing-lip, scented the air, and moved into the open, calm and unafraid.

The snow fell. There was a fresh, clean smell in the wilderness air.

The League Of The Old Men

By JACK LONDON

Wanton murder and cruelty against the whites were among the crimes admitted by the old Siwash Indian and his people. But after he told his story to the packed courtroom in Dawson City there were many who wondered which had suffered most—the white race or the Indians.

AT THE BARRACKS a man was being tried for his life. He was an old man, a native from the Whitefish River, which empties into the Yukon below Lake Le Barge. All Dawson was wrought up over the affair, and likewise the Yukon dwellers for a thousand miles up and down. It has been the custom of the land-robbing and sea-robbing Anglo-Saxon to give the law to conquered peoples, and ofttimes this law is harsh. But in the case of Imber the law for once seemed inadequate and weak. In the mathematical nature of things, equity did not reside in the punishment to be accorded him. The punishment was a foregone conclusion, there could be no doubt of that; and though it was capital, Imber had but one life, while the tale against him was one of scores.

In fact the blood of so many was upon his hands that the killings attributed to him did not permit of precise enumeration. Smoking a pipe by the trailside or lounging around the stove, men made rough estimates of the numbers that had perished at his hands. They had been whites, all of them, these poor murdered people, and they had been slain singly, in pairs, and in parties. And so purposeless and wanton had been these killings that they had long been a mystery to the

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mounted police, even in the time of the captains, and later, when the creeks realized and a governor came from the Dominion to make the land pay for its prosperity.

But more mysterious still was the coming of Imber to Dawson to give himself up.

It was in the late spring, when the Yukon was growling and writhing under its ice, that the old Indian climbed painfully up the bank from the river trail and stood blinking on the main street. Men who had witnessed his advent noted that he was weak and tottery, and that he staggered over to a heap of cabin logs and sat down. He sat there a full day, staring straight before him at the unceasing tide of white men that flooded past. Many a head jerked curiously to the side to meet his stare, and more than one remark was dropped anent the old Siwash with so strange a look upon his face. No end of men remembered afterward that they had been struck by his extraordinary figure, and forever afterward prided themselves upon their swift discernment of the unusual.

But it remained for Dickensen, Little Dickensen, to be the hero of the occasion. Little Dickensen had come into the land with great dreams and a pocketful of cash; but with the cash the dreams vanished, and to earn his passage back to the States he had accepted a clerical position with the brokerage firm of Holbrook and Mason.

Across the street from the office of Holbrook and Mason was the heap of cabin logs upon which Imber sat. Dickensen looked out of the window at him before he went to lunch; and when he came back from lunch he looked out of the window, and the old Siwash was still there.

Dickensen continued to look out of the window, and he, too, forever afterward prided himself upon his swiftness of discernment. He was a romantic little chap, and he likened the immobile old heathen to the genius of the Siwash race, gazing calm-eyed upon the hosts of the invading Saxon. The hours swept along, but Imber did not vary his posture, did not by a hairsbreadth move a muscle; and Dickensen remembered the man who once sat upright on a sled in the main street where men passed to and fro. They thought the man was resting, but later, when they touched him, they found him stiff and cold, frozen to death in the midst of the busy street. To undouble him, that he might fit into a coffin, they had been forced to lug him to a fire and thaw him out a bit. Dickensen shivered at the recollection.

Later on Dickensen went out on the sidewalk to smoke a cigar and cool off; and a little later Emily Travis happened along.

Emily Travis was dainty and delicate and rare, whether in London or Klondike she gowned herself as befitted the daughter of a millionaire mining engineer. Little Dickensen deposited his cigar on an outside window ledge where he could find it again, and lifted his hat.

They chatted for ten minutes or so, when Emily Travis, glancing past Dickensen's shoulder, gave a startled little scream. Dickensen turned about to see, and was startled too. Imber had crossed the street and was standing there, a gaunt and hungry-looking shadow, his gaze riveted upon the girl.

"What do you want?" Little Dickensen demanded, tremulously plucky.

Imber grunted and stalked up to Emily Travis. He looked her over, keenly and carefully, every square inch of her. Especially did he appear interested in her silky brown hair and in the color of her cheek, faintly sprayed and soft, like the downy bloom of a butterfly wing. He walked around her, surveying her with the calculating eye of a man who studies the lines upon which a horse or a boat is builded. In the course of his circuit the pink shell of her ear came between his eye and the westering sun, and he stopped to contemplate its rosy transparency. Then he returned to her face and looked long and intently into her blue eyes. He grunted and laid a hand on her arm midway between the shoulder and elbow. With his other hand he lifted her forearm and doubled it back. Disgust and wonder showed in his face, and he dropped her arm with a contemptuous grunt. Then he muttered a few guttural syllables, turned his back upon her, and addressed himself to Dickensen.

DICKENSEN could not understand his speech, and Emily Travis laughed. Imber turned from one to the other, frowning, but both shook their heads. He was about to go away, when she called out:

"Oh, Jimmy! Come here!"

Jimmy came from the other side of the street. He was a big, hulking Indian clad in approved white-man style, with an Eldorado king's sombrero on his head. He talked with Imber, haltingly, with throaty spasms. Jimmy was a Sitkan, possessed of no more than a passing knowledge of the interior dialects.

"Him Whitefish man," he said to Emily Travis. "Me savve um talk no very much. Him want to look see chief white man."

"The governor," suggested Dickensen.

Jimmy talked some more with the Whitefish man, and his face went grave and puzzled.

"I t'ink um want Cap'n Alexander," he explained. "Him say um kill white man, white woman, white boy, plenty kill um white people. Him want to die."

"Insane, I guess," said Dickensen.

"What you call dat?" queried Jimmy.

Dickensen thrust a finger figuratively inside his head and imparted a rotary motion thereto.

"Mebbe so, meebe so," said Jimmy, returning to Imber, who still demanded the chief man of the white men.

A mounted policeman (unmounted for Klondike service) joined the group and heard Imber's wish repeated. He was a stalwart young fellow, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, legs cleanly built and stretched wide apart, and tall though Imber was, he towered above him by half a head. His eyes were cool and gray and steady, and he carried himself with the peculiar confidence of power that is bred of blood and tradition. His splendid masculinity was emphasized by his excessive boyishness—he was a mere lad—and his smooth cheek promised a blush as willingly as the cheek of a maid.

Imber was drawn to him at once. The fire leaped into his eyes at sight of a saber slash that scarred his cheek. He ran a withered hand down the young fellow's leg and caressed the swelling thew. He smote the broad chest with his knuckles, and pressed and prodded the thick muscle pads that covered the shoulders like a cuirass. The group had been added to by curious passers-by—husky miners, mountaineers, and frontiersmen, sons of the long-legged and broad-shouldered generations. Imber glanced from one to another, then he spoke aloud in the Whitefish tongue.

"What did he say?" asked Dickensen.

"Him say um all the same one man, dat p'liceman," Jimmy interpreted.

Little Dickensen was little, and what of Miss Travis? He felt sorry for having asked the question.

The policeman was sorry for him and stepped into the breach. "I fancy there may be something in his story. I'll take him up to the captain for examination. Tell him to come along with me, Jimmy."

Jimmy indulged in more throaty spasms, and Imber grunted and looked satisfied.

"But ask him what he said, Jimmy, and what he meant when he took hold of my arm."

So spoke Emily Travis, and Jimmy put the question and received the answer.

"Him say you no afraid," said Jimmy.

Emily Travis looked pleased.

"Him say you no *skookum*, no strong, all the same very soft like little baby. Him break you, in um two hands, to little pieces. Him t'ink much funny, very strange, how you can be mother of men so big, so strong, like dat p'liceman."

Emily Travis kept her eyes up and unfaltering, but her cheeks were sprayed with scarlet. Little Dickensen blushed and was quite embarrassed. The policeman's face blazed with his boy's blood.

"Come along, you," he said gruffly, setting his shoulder to the crowd and forcing a way.

Thus it was that Imber found his way to the barracks, where he made full and voluntary confession, and from the precincts of which he never emerged.

IMBER looked very tired. The fatigue of hopelessness and age was in his face. His shoulders drooped depressingly, and his eyes were lackluster. His mop of hair should have been white, but sun and weather had burned and bitten it so that it hung limp and lifeless and colorless. He took no interest in what went

on around him. The courtroom was jammed with the men of the creeks and trails, and there was an ominous note in the rumble and grumble of their low-pitched voices, which came to his ears like the growl of the sea from deep caverns.

He sat close by a window, and his apathetic eyes rested now and again on the dreary scene without. The sky was overcast, and a gray drizzle was falling. It was floodtime on the Yukon. The ice was gone, and the river was up in the town. Back and forth on the main street, in canoes and poling boats, passed the people that never rested. Often he saw these boats turn aside from the street and enter the flooded square that marked the barracks' parade ground. Sometimes they disappeared beneath him, and he heard them jar against the house logs and their occupants scramble in through the window. After that came the slush of water against men's legs as they waded across the lower room and mounted the stairs. Then they appeared in the doorway, with doffed hats and dripping sea boots, and added themselves to the waiting crowd.

And while they centered their looks on him, and in grim anticipation enjoyed the penalty he was to pay, Imber looked at them and mused on their ways, and on their law that never slept, but went on unceasing, in good times and bad, in flood and famine, through trouble and terror and death, and which would go on unceasing, it seemed to him, to the end of time.

A man rapped sharply on a table, and the conversation droned away into silence. Imber looked at the man. He seemed one in authority, yet Imber divined the square-browed man who sat by a desk farther back to be the one chief over them all and over the man who had rapped. Another man by the same table uprose and began to read aloud from many fine sheets of paper. At the top of each sheet he cleared his throat, at the bottom moistened his fingers. Imber did not understand his speech, but the others did, and he knew that it made them angry. Sometimes it made them very angry, and once a man cursed him, in single syllables, stinging and tense, till a man at the table rapped him to silence.

For an interminable period the man read. His monotonous, sing-song utterance lured Imber to dreaming, and he was dreaming deeply when the man ceased. A voice spoke to him in his own Whitefish tongue, and he roused up, without surprise, to look upon the face of his sister's son, a young man who had wandered away years agone to make his dwelling with the whites.

"Thou dost not remember me," he said by way of greeting.

"Nay," Imber answered. "Thou art Howkan who went away. Thy mother be dead."

"She was an old woman," said Howkan.

But Imber did not hear, and Howkan, with hand upon his shoulder, roused him again.

"I shall speak to thee what the man has spoken, which is the tale of the troubles thou hast done and which thou hast told, O fool, to the Captain Alexander. And thou shalt understand and say if it be true talk or talk not true. It is so commanded."

Howkan had fallen among the mission folk and been taught by them to read and write. In his hands he held the many fine sheets from which the man had read aloud, and which had been taken down by a clerk when Imber first made confession, through the mouth of Jimmy, to Captain Alexander. Howkan began to read. Imber listened for a space, when a wonderment rose up in his face and he broke in abruptly.

"That be my talk, Howkan. Yet from thy lips it comes when thy ears have not heard."

Howkan smirked with self-appreciation. His hair was parted in the middle. "Nay, from the paper it comes, O Imber. Never have my ears heard. From the paper it comes, through my eyes, into my head, and out of my mouth to thee. Thus it comes."

"Thus it comes? It be there in the paper?" Imber's voice sank in whisperful awe as he crackled the sheets 'twixt thumb and finger and stared at the charactery scrawled thereon. "It be a great medicine, Howkan, and thou art a worker of wonders."

"It be nothing, it be nothing," the young man responded carelessly and pridefully.

He read at hazard from the document: "In that year, before the break of the ice, came an old man, and a boy who was lame of one foot. These also did I kill, and the old man made much noise——"

"It be true," Imber iterrupted breathlessly.

"He made much noise and would not die for a long time. But how dost thou know, Howkan? The chief man of the white men told thee, mayhap? No one beheld me, and him alone have I told."

Howkan shook his head with impatience. "Have I not told thee it be there in the paper, O fool?"

Imber stared hard at the ink-scrawled surface.

"As the hunter looks upon the snow and says, 'Here but yesterday there passed a rabbit; and here by the willow scrub it stood and listened, and heard, and was afraid; and here it turned upon its trail; and here it went with great swiftness, leaping wide; and here, with greater swiftness and wider leapings, came a lynx; and here, where the claws cut deep into the snow, the lynx made a very great leap; and here it struck, with the rabbit under and rolling belly up; and here leads off the trail of the lynx alone, and there is no more rabbit'—as the hunter looks upon the markings of the snow and says thus and so and here, dost thou, too, look upon the paper and say thus and so and here be the things old Imber hath done?"

"Even so," said Howkan, "And now do thou listen, and keep thy woman's tongue between thy teeth till thou art called upon for speech."

Thereafter, and for a long time, Howkan read to him the confession, and Imber remained musing and silent. At the end he said:

"It be my talk, and true talk, but I am grown old, Howkan, and forgotten things come back to me which were well for the head man there to know. First, there was the man who came over the Ice Mountains, with cunning traps made of iron, who sought the beaver of the Whitefish. Him I slew. And there were three men seeking gold on the Whitefish long ago. Them also I slew, and left them to the wolverines. And at the Five Fingers there was a man with a raft and much meat."

MALEMUTE MYSTERY

A great deal of misinformation has been spread about the so-called Eskimo dog and the malemute. We are told that the Eskimo dog is descended from the wolf of the Far North. If that is true, why do these dogs weigh only half as much as a full-grown wolf? Why do their tails curl up over their backs, whereas a wolf drags his tail? Why isn't their color more wolflike? About the only thing they have in common is that they do not bark; they howl.

Hundreds of years ago there may have been a single breed of Eskimo dog, but they have long been mongrels. In certain instances where an Eskimo dog may have the typical wolf coloring, it usually turns out that the father of the dog (or some not very remote ancestor) was a wolf. The Eskimo dog is called a "Husky," perhaps because the Hudson's Bay Company employes used to speak of the Eskimos themselves as Huskies.

During the gold rush to northwestern Alaska, in 1899, the stampeders found near the mouth of the Yukon River a group (never a "tribe") of Eskimos called the Malligmiut (the "g" is silent), or "the people from the place where the waves are high." The careless pronounciation of the miners is responsible for the word "Malemute." These were merely Eskimo dogs, purchased from a certain group of Eskimos.

AT THE moments when Imber paused to remember, Howkan translated and a clerk reduced to writing. The courtroom listened stolidly to each unadorned little tragedy, till Imber told of a red-haired man whose eyes were crossed and whom he had killed with a remarkably long shot.

"Hell," said a man in the forefront of the onlookers. He said it soulfully and sorrowfully. He was red-haired. "Hell," he repeated. "That was my brother Bill." And at regular intervals throughout the session, his solemn "Hell" was heard in the courtroom; nor did his comrades check him, nor did the man at the table rap him to order.

Imber's head drooped once more, and his eyes went dull, as though a film rose up and covered them from the world. And he dreamed as only age can dream upon the colossal futility of youth.

Later Howkan roused him again, saying: "Stand up, O Imber. It be commanded that thou tellest why you did these troubles, and slew these people, and journeyed here seeking the law."

Imber rose feebly to his feet and swayed back and forth. He began to speak in a low and faintly rumbling voice, but Howkan interrupted him.

"This old man, he is damn crazy," he said in English to the square-browed man. "His talk is foolish and like that of a child."

"We will hear his talk which is like that of a child," said the square-browed man. "And we will hear it, word for word, as he speaks it. Do you understand?"

Howkan understood, and Imber's eyes flashed, for he had witnessed the play between his sister's son and the man in authority. And then began the story, the epic of a bronze patriot which might well itself be wrought into bronze for the generations unborn. The crowd fell strangely silent, and the square-browed judge leaned head on hand and pondered his soul and the soul of his race. Only was heard the deep tones of Imber, rhythmically alternating with the shrill voice of the interpreter, and now and again, like the bell of the Lord, the wondering and meditative "Hell" of the red-haired man.

"I am Imber of the Whitefish people." So ran the interpretation of Howkan, whose inherent barbarism gripped hold of him, and who lost his mission culture and veneered civilization as he caught the savage ring and rhythm of old Imber's tale. "My father was Otsbaok, a strong man. The land was warm with sunshine and gladness when I was a boy. The people did not hunger after strange things, nor hearken to new voices, and the ways of their fathers were their ways. The women found favor in the eyes of the young men, and the young men looked upon them with content. Babes hung at the breasts of the women, and they were heavy-hipped with increase of the tribe. Men were men in those days. In peace and plenty, and in war and famine, they were men.

"At that time there was more fish in the water than now, and more meat in the forest. Our dogs were wolves, warm with thick hides and hard to the frost and storm. And as with our dogs so with us, for we were likewise hard to the frost and storm. And when the Pellys came into our land we slew them and were slain. For we were men, we Whitefish, and our fathers and our fathers' fathers had fought against the Pellys and determined the bounds of the land.

"As I say, with our dogs so with us. And one day came the first white man. He dragged himself, so, on hand and knee, in the snow. And his skin was stretched tight, and his bones were sharp beneath. Never was such a man, we thought, and we wondered of what strange tribe he was, and of its land. And he was weak, most weak, like a little child, so that we gave him a place by the fire, and warm furs to lie upon, and we gave him food as little children are given food.

"And with him was a dog, large as three of our dogs, and very weak. The hair of this dog was short, and not warm, and the tail was frozen so that the end fell off. And this strange dog we fed, and bedded by the fire, and fought from it our dogs, which else would have killed him. And what of the moose meat and the sun-dried salmon, the man and dog took strength to themselves; and what of the strength they became big and unafraid. And the man spoke loud words and laughed at the old men and young men, and looked boldly upon the maidens. And the dog fought with our dogs, and for all of his short hair and softness slew three of them in one day.

"When we asked the man concerning his people, he said, 'I have many brothers,' and laughed in a way that was not good. And when he was in his full strength he went away, and with him went Noda, daughter to the chief. First, after that, was one of our bitches brought to pup. And never was there such a breed of dogs —big-headed, thick-jawed, and short-haired, and helpless. Well do I remember my father, Otsbaok, a strong man. His face was black with anger at such helplessness, and he took a stone, so, and so, and there was no more helplessness. And two summers after that came Noda back to us with a man-child in the hollow of her arm.

"And that was the beginning. Came a second white man, with short-haired dogs, which he left behind him when he went. And with him went six of our strongest dogs, for which, in trade, he had given Koo-So-Tee, my mother's brother, a wonderful pistol that fired with great swift-

ness six times. And Koo-So-Tee was very big, what of the pistol, and laughed at our bows and arrows. 'Woman's things,' he called them, and went forth against the bald-face grizzly, with the pistol in his hand. Now it be known that it is not good to hunt the bald-face with a pistol, but how were we to know? And how was Koo-So-Tee to know? So he went against the bald-face, very brave, and fired the pistol with great swiftness six times; and the bald-face but grunted and broke in his breast like it were an egg, and like honey from a bee's nest dripped the brains of Koo-So-Tee upon the ground. He was a good hunter, and there was no one to bring meat to his squaw and children. And we were bitter, and we said, 'That which for the white men is well, is for us not well.' And this be true. There be many white men and fat, but their ways have made us few and lean.

"CAME the third white man, with great wealth of all manner of wonderful foods and things. And twenty of our strongest dogs he took from us in trade. Also, what of present and great promises, ten of our young hunters did he take with him on a journey which fared no man knew where. It is said they died in the snow of the Ice Mountains where man has never been, or in the Hills of Silence which are beyond the edge of the earth. Be that as it may, dogs and young hunters were seen never again by the Whitefish people.

"And more white men came with the years, and ever, with pay and presents, they led the young men away with them. And sometimes the young men came back with strange tales of dangers and toils in the lands beyond the Pellys, and sometimes they did not come back. And we said: 'If they be unafraid of life, these white men, it is because they have many lives; but we be few by the Whitefish, and the young men shall go away no more.' But the young men did go away; and the young women went also; and we were very wroth.

"It be true, we ate flour, and salt pork, and drank tea which was a great delight; only, when we could not get tea, it was very bad and we became short of speech and quick of anger. So we grew to hunger for the things the white men brought in trade. Trade! Trade! All the time was it trade! One winter we sold our meat for clocks that would not go, and watches with broken guts, and files worn smooth, and pistols without cartridges and worthless. And then came famine, and we were without meat, and twoscore died ere the break of spring.

"'Now are we grown weak,' we said; 'and the Pellys will fall upon us, and our bounds be overthrown.' But as it fared with us, so had it fared with the Pellys, and they were too weak to come against us.

"My father, Otsbaok, a strong man, was now old and very wise. And he spoke to the chief, saying: 'Behold, our dogs be worthless. No longer are they thick-furred and strong, and they die in the frost and harness. Let us go into the village and kill them, saving only the wolf ones, and these let us tie out in the night that they may mate with the wild wolves of the forest. Thus shall we have dogs warm and strong again.'

"And his word was harkened to, and we Whitefish became known for our dogs, which were the best in the land. But known we were not for ourselves. The best of our young men and women had gone away with the white men to wander on trail and river to far places. And the young women came back old and broken, as Noda had come, or they came not at all. And the young men came back to sit by our fires for a time, full of ill speech and rough ways, drinking evil drinks and gambling through long nights and days, with a great unrest always in their hearts, till the call of the white men came to them and they went away again to the unknown places. And they were without honor and respect, jeering the old-time customs and laughing in the faces of chief and shamans.

"As I say, we were become a weak breed, we Whitefish. We sold our warm skins and furs for tobacco and whisky and thin cotton things that left us shivering in the cold. And the coughing sickness came upon us, and men and women coughed and sweated through the long nights, and the hunters on trail spat blood upon the snow. And now one and now another bled swiftly from the mouth and

died. And the women bore few children, and those they bore were weak and given to sickness. And other sicknesses came to us from the white men, the like of which we had never known and could not understand. Smallpox, likewise measles, have I heard these sicknesses named, and we died of them as die the salmon in the still eddies when in the fall their eggs are spawned and there is no longer need for them to live.

"And yet—and here be the strangeness of it—the white men come as the breath of death; all their ways lead to death, their nostrils are filled with it; and yet they do not die. Theirs the whisky and tobacco and short-haired dogs; theirs the many sicknesses, the smallpox and measles, the coughing and mouth-bleeding; theirs the white skin, and softness to the frost and storm; and theirs the pistols that shoot six times very swift and are worthless. And yet they grow fat on their many ills, and prosper, and lay a heavy hand over all the world and tread mightily upon its peoples. And their women, too, are soft as little babes, most breakable and never broken, the mothers of men. And out of all this softness and sickness and weakness come strength and power and authority. They be gods or devils, as the case may be. I do not know. What do I know—I, old Imber of the Whitefish? Only do I know that they are past understanding, these white men, far-wanderers and fighters over the earth that they be.

"As I say, the meat in the forest became less and less. It be true, the white man's gun is most excellent and kills a long way off; but of what worth the gun, when there is no meat to kill? When I was a boy on the Whitefish there was moose on every hill, and each year came the caribou uncountable. But now the hunter may take the trail ten days and not one moose gladden his eyes, while the caribou uncountable come no more at all. Small worth the gun, I say, killing a long way off, when there be nothin to kill.

"AND I, Imber, pondered upon these things, watching the while the Whitefish, and the Pellys, and all the tribes of the land, perishing as perished the meat of the forest. Long I pondered. I talked with the shamans and the old men who were wise. I went apart that the sounds of the village might not disturb me, and I ate no meat so that my belly should not press upon me and make me slow of eye and ear. I sat long and sleepless in the forest, wide-eyed for the sign, my ears patient and keen for the word that was to come. And I wandered alone in the blackness of night to the river bank, where was wind-moaning and sobbing of water, and where I sought wisdom from the ghosts of old shamans in the trees and dead and gone.

"And in the end, as in a vision, came to me the short-haired and detestable dogs, and the way seemed plain. By the wisdom of Otsbaok, my father and a strong man, had the blood of our own wolf dogs been kept clean, wherefore had they remained warm of hide and strong in the harness. So I returned to my village and made oration to the men. 'This be a tribe, these white men,' I said. 'A very large tribe, and doubtless there is no longer meat in their land, and they are come among us to make a new land for themselves. But they weaken us, and we die. They are a very hungry folk. Already has our meat gone from us, and it were well, if we would live, that we deal by them as we have dealt by their dogs.'

"And further oration I made, counseling fight. And the men of the Whitefish listened, and some said one thing, and some another, and some spoke of other and worthless things, and no man made brave talk of deeds and war. But while the young men were weak as water and afraid, I watched that the old men sat silent, and that in their eyes fires came and went. And later, when the village slept and no one knew, I drew the old men away into the forest and made more talk. And now we were agreed, and we remembered the good young days, and the free land, and the times of plenty, and the gladness and sunshine; and we called ourselves brothers, and swore great secrecy, and a mighty oath to cleanse the land of the evil breed that had come upon it. It be plain we were fools, but how were we to know, we old men of the Whitefish?

"And to hearten the others, I did the first deed. I kept guard upon the Yukon

till the first canoe came down. In it were two white men, and when I stood upright upon the bank and raised my hand they changed their course and drove in to me. And as the man in the bow lifted his head, so, that he might know wherefore I wanted him, my arrow sang through the air straight to his throat, and he knew. The second man, who held paddle in the stern, had his rifle half to his shoulder when the first of my three spear casts smote him.

"'These be the first,' I said when the old men had gathered to me. 'Later we will bind together all the old men of all the tribes, and after that the young men who remain strong, and the work will become easy.'

"And then the two dead white men we cast into the river. And of the canoe, which was a very good canoe, we made a fire, and a fire, also, of the things within the canoe. But first we looked at the things, and they were pouches of leather which we cut open with our knives. And inside these pouches were many papers, like that from which thou hast read, O Howkan, with markings on them which we marveled at and could not understand. Now I am become wise, and I know them for the speech of men as thou hast told men."

A whisper and buzz went around the courtroom when Howkan finished interpreting the affair of the canoe, and one man's voice spoke up: "That was the lost '91 mail, Peter James and Delaney bringing it in and last spoken at Le Barge by Matthews going out." The clerk scratched steadily away, and another paragraph was added to the history of the North.

"There be little more," Imber went on slowly. "It be there on the paper, the things we did. We were old men, and we did not understand. Even I, Imber, do not now understand. Secretly we slew, and continued to slay, for with our years we were crafty and we had learned the swiftness of going without haste. When white men came among us with black looks and rough words, and took away six of the young men with irons binding them helpless, we knew we must slay wider and farther. And one by one we old men departed upriver and down to the unknown lands. It was a brave thing. Old we were, and unafraid, but the fear of far places is a terrible fear to old men.

"So we slew, without haste and craftily. On the Chilcoot and in the Delta we slew, from the passes to the sea, wherever the white men camped or broke their trails. It be true, they died, but it was without worth. Ever did they come over the mountains, ever did they grow and grow, while we, being old, became less and less. I remember, by the Caribou Crossing, the camp of a white man. He was a very little white man, and three of the old men came upon him in his sleep. And the next day I came upon the four of them. The white man alone still breathed, and there was breath in him to curse me once and well before he died.

"And so it went, now one old man, and now another. Sometimes the word reached us long after of how they died, and sometimes it did not reach us. And the old men of the other tribes were weak and afraid, and would not join with us. As I say, one by one, till I alone was left. I am Imber, of the Whitefish people. My father was Otsbaok, a strong man. There are no Whitefish now. Of the old men I am the last. The young men and young women are gone away, some to live with the Pellys, some with the Salmons, and more with the white men. I am very old and very tired, and it being vain fighting the law, as thou sayest, Howkan, I am come seeking the law."

"O Imber, thou are indeed a fool," said Howkan.

But Imber was dreaming. The square-browed judge likewise dreamed, and all his race rose up before him in a mighty phantasmagoria—his steel-shod, mail-clad race, the lawgiver and worldmaker among the families of men. He saw it dawn red-flickering across the dark forests and sullen seas; he saw it blaze, bloody and red, to full and triumphant noon; and down the shaded slope he saw the blood-red sands dropping into night. And through it all he observed the law, pitiless and potent, ever unswerving and ever ordaining, greater than the motes of men who fulfilled it or were crushed by it, even as it was greater than he, his heart speaking for softness.

The Law of the Yukon

By Robert W. Service

This is the Law of the Yukon, and ever she makes it plain:
"Send not your foolish and feeble; send me your strong and your sane—
Strong for the red rage of battle; sane, for I harry them sore;
Send me men girt for the combat, men who are grit to the core;
Swift as the panther in triumph, fierce as the bear in defeat,
Sired of a bulldog parent, steeled in the furnace heat.
Send me the best of your breeding, lend me your chosen ones;
Them will I take to my bosom, them will I call my sons;
Them will I gild with my treasure, them will I glut with my meat;
But the others—the misfits, the failures—I trample under my feet.
Dissolute, damned and despairful, crippled and palsied and slain,
Ye would send me the spawn of your gutters—Go! take back your spawn again.

"Wild and wide are my borders, stern as death is my sway;
From my ruthless throne I have ruled alone for a million years and a day;
Hugging my mighty treasure, waiting for man to come,
Till he swept like a turbid torrent, and after him swept—the scum.
The pallid pimp of the dead-line, the enervate of the pen,
One by one I weeded them out, for all that I sought was—Men.
One by one I dismayed them, frighting them sore with my glooms;
One by one I betrayed them unto my manifold dooms.
Drowned them like rats in my rivers, starved them like curs on my plains,
Rotted the flesh that was left them, poisoned the blood in their veins;
Burst with my winter upon them, searing forever their sight,
Lashed them with fungus-white faces, whimpering wild in the night;

From Ballads of a Cheechako By Robert Service
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"Staggering blind through the storm-whirl, stumbling mad through the snow,
Frozen stiff in the ice-pack, brittle and bent like a bow;
Featureless, formless, forsaken, scented by wolves in their flight,
Left for the wind to make music through ribs that are glittering white;
Gnawing the black crust of failure, searching the pit of despair,
Crooking the toe in the trigger, trying to patter a prayer;
Going outside with an escort, raving with lips all afoam,
Writing a cheque for a million, driveling feebly of home;
Lost like a louse in the burning . . . or else in the tented town
Seeking a drunkard's solace, sinking and sinking down;
Steeped in the slime at the bottom, dead to a decent world,
Lost 'mid the human flotsam, far on the frontier hurled;
In the camp at the bend of the river, with its dozen saloons aglare,
Its gambling dens ariot, its gramophones all ablare;
Crimped with the crimes of a city, sin-ridden and bridled with lies,
In the hust of my mountained vastness, in the flush of my midnight skies.
Plague-spots, yet tools of my purpose, so natheless I suffer them thrive,
Crushing my Weak in their clutches, that only my Strong may survive.

"But the others, the men of my mettle, the men who would 'stablish my fame
Unto its ultimate issue, winning my honor, not shame;
Searching my uttermost valleys, fighting each step as they go,
Shooting the wrath of my rapids, scaling my ramparts of snow;
Ripping the guts of my mountains, looting the beds of my creeks,
Them will I take to my bosom, and speak as a mother speaks.
I am the land that listens, I am the land that broods;
Steeped in eternal beauty, crystalline waters and woods.
Long have I waited lonely, shunned as a thing accurst,
Monstrous, moody, pathetic, the last of the lands and the first;
Visioning camp-fires at twilight, sad with a longing forlorn,
Feeling my womb o'er pregnant with the seed of cities unborn.
Wild and wide are my borders, stern as death is my sway,
And I wait for the men who will win me—and I will not be won in a day;
And I will not be won by weaklings, subtle, suave and mild,
But by men with the hearts of vikings, and the simple faith of a child;
Desperate, strong and resistless, unthrottled by fear or defeat,
Them will I gild with my treasure, them will I glut with my meat.

"Lofty, I stand from each sister land, patient and wearily wise,
With the weight of a world of sadness in my quiet, passionless eyes;
Dreaming alone o, a people, dreaming alone of a day,
When men shall not rape my riches, and curse me and go away;
Making a bawd of my bounty, fouling the hand that gave—
Till I rise in my wrath and I sweep on their path and I stamp them into a grave.
Dreaming of men who will bless me, of women esteeming my good,
Of children born in my borders of radiant motherhood,
Of cities leaping to stature, of fame like a flag unfurled,
As I pour the tide of my riches in the eager lap of the world."

This is the Law of the Yukon, that only the Strong shall thrive;
That surely the Weak shall perish, and only the Fit survive.
Dissolute, damned and despairful, crippled and palsied and slain,
This is the Will of the Yukon,—Lo, how she makes it plain!

MURDER

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The Arctic's Greatest Tragedy

By BURT M. McCONNELL

Of all the expeditions in history that have sought to conquer the perilous Arctic, the most elaborate—and the most disastrous—was that of Sir John Franklin. The Northland's rigorous elements, plus the expedition's foolhardy refusal to adopt the customs of the native Eskimos, eventually led to the death of the entire party—129 naval officers and men.

IN THE LONG succession of Arctic expeditions, dating from the dawn of British history when King Alfred drove back the invading Danes, that of Sir John Franklin was the most elaborate, and the most disastrous. Of the 129 naval officers and men who sailed from England in the summer of 1845 not one returned. It was just a hundred and one years ago (1847) that Sir John died near the North Magnetic Pole, while his two ships, the *EREBUS* and the *TERROR*,

were beset by the ice. But the greater part of the expedition did not perish until after they had achieved the main object of the voyage—the discovery of a Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and the Pacific. They were conquerors even in death.

For more than four hundred years explorers had sought a practicable water route between Greenland and Siberia. They had attacked the Arctic's bastions of ice from the east and the west, and always they had been repulsed by the drifting floes; by scurvy; and by the elements. In a number of instances their ships were crushed or driven ashore by ice fields moving under the influence of winds or currents, or both. That is what happened to Franklin's vessels.

In fact, somewhere at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, between Baffin Bay and Bering Strait, lie the rotting bones of a hundred ships, victims of pressure ridges that cracked their oaken sides. Other ships frozen in the drifting pack, still may be drifting about in that "Sargasso Sea" of the Great White North. What became of their crews? No one knows.

For fifteen years after the Franklin expedition was swallowed up by mist and fog and blinding snow, the disappearance of these 129 men was an impenetrable mystery, the solution of which enlisted the sympathy and support of the entire world. One relief expedition after another, charged with the discovery of their whereabouts or their fate, was sent out by the British Government, the United States, and Sir John's widow. Most of them returned with meagre reports or none at all. Several met disaster.

From all that has been gathered in the last hundred years, it seems that the *EREBUS* and the *TERROR* spent their first winter in the ice off Beechey Island. The next year, 1846, they appear to have fought their way to the northwest corner of King William Land. According to Eskimos then living in that region, who were questioned through an interpreter some fifteen years later, one of the Franklin ships sank in deep water after having been crushed by the drifting pack. The other was forced on shore by the ice. And there it lay for years, furnishing the natives with oak for their bows, arrows, sleds, and kayaks; steel for their knives, axes, spears, and arrowheads.

By June of 1847, Sir John, nine of his officers, and fifteen crew members had succumbed to disease and the rigors of the Arctic. When the ice did not break up during the summer and allow their remaining ship to be floated, the explorers realized that they were doomed to spend a third winter in the polar wilderness.

Capt. Crozier had succeeded to the command, and upon him devolved the terrible necessity of abandoning the ship and endeavoring to save the rest of the party by a desperate attempt to reach the nearest Hudson's Bay Company post, more than 450 miles to the southward. In April of the following year (the spring period when sledging is at its best and the hours of daylight are increasing), the 105 explorers, dragging their heavy sleds, set out toward the south.

Their destination was an outpost on the Great Fish River. They never reached it. No one knows the reason, for their records, presumably left in water-proof containers and covered with rocks, meant nothing whatever to migratory Eskimos. When the natives pillaged a cairn, they discarded the records as so much worthless paper.

WE DO KNOW, however, that the Franklin survivors were inexperienced in Arctic travel. For in that day and age it was considered hazardous, even foolhardy, to set out on a long sledging trip without first establishing a line of depots containing food, fuel, clothing, and other necessities. The members of the retreating party should not be censured, therefore, because they did not adopt the Daniel Boone technique of living off the country. They were British Navy officers and men, not frontiersmen.

But one feels that they might have adopted the Eskimo type of clothing: two hooded caribou-skin shirts, one worn with the hair next the body and the other over that, with the hair outside and an air-space between; caribou-skin trousers, with the hair inside; socks made of the skin of the Arctic hare; innersoles of dried grass; and boots made of the hind-leg skin of the caribou, so that the hock forms a natural heel. Such an outfit weighs less than

twelve pounds and can be worn in the severest Arctic weather.

In the matter of boats, too, they could have profited by taking a page from the Eskimo book. The boats which they salvaged from the vessels, it is estimated, weighed in the neighborhood of 750 pounds, and such a boat required a 650-lb. sled to transport it. Moreover, wooden boats were too fragile for sailing and rowing among the drifting ice fields. They were too easily punctured. After hauling these massive creations a few miles the men were exhausted. On the other hand let us consider the flat-bottomed, 30-ft. *umiak* of the Eskimos. This boat weighs less than three hundred pounds and can be hauled on a sled weighing less than a hundred pounds—a saving in weight of almost half a ton! Moreover, the covering of the *umiak* (walrus hide or the skin of the *billiuak*) is practically puncture-proof, and at the end of a sea journey can be used for tent coverings and boot-soles. The boat itself can be sailed or paddled across a stretch of open water, carrying, besides the crew, a sled and a team of dogs to haul the boat across an intervening ice-field. It can be hauled out onto an ice-floe, carried by the crew or hauled on a sled to the opposite side, launched again, and paddled or sailed to the next ice-field.

But the Franklin survivors, in the best British tradition, carried on as their forebears had done.

At any rate, it is a matter of record that before they had gone eighty miles on their march southward it was necessary for them to halt and set up a hospital tent, probably to treat frost-bitten feet and fingers; and snow-blindness. For in that day and age a white man who was too proud to learn from the Eskimos "thawed out" a frost-bitten nose by rubbing it with snow, thus increasing the frozen area and depth.

But an Eskimo, at the first indication of frost-bite (stiffening of the facial muscles), would take one hand from his mitten and apply it to the affected spot. If the warmth from one hand was not sufficient, he used the other. And, while he knew nothing of ultra-violet rays, he knew that snow reflected the sun's rays, and he made wooden goggles, with narrow horizontal slits. White men were inclined to think this a lot of poppycock. They did not know, as we now have learned, that the ultra-violet rays of the sun are even more likely to cause snow-blindness on overcast than on bright, days (the movies notwithstanding); and that the ultra-violet rays are reflected by only three things —snow, water, and aluminum paint.

Overburdened, exhausted and ill, the Franklin survivors eventually abandoned their boats and turned back toward their winter quarters. All but two, apparently, perished on this return journey, for subsequent relief expeditions found no evidence of their return; the two men who stayed behind died at the boats.

Late in 1847, after two years of waiting, preparations were begun in England for the possible necessity of sending relief to the Franklin expedition. In the spring of 1848, while the survivors actually were trudging along the west coast of King William Land, the British Government and the widow and friends of Sir John were outfitting a search expedition. And from that time on, for fifteen years, one expedition after another was dispatched in quest of the missing explorers. In that period, some 40,000 miles were sledged by the various parties. Approximately forty expeditions in all went forth. In fact, the Franklin search stands without a parallel in the history of Arctic exploration. The British Government offered a reward of $50,000 for tidings of the party.

Perhaps the most tragic thing about the retreat of the Franklin followers is the fact, as subsequent events have shown, that they died in a land of comparative plenty, where Eskimos for perhaps two thousand years had lived by the bow and arrow. These brave men perished because, in their haste to reach the nearest Hudson's Bay post, they overlooked the game possibilities of the region. Millions of caribou roamed that section of the Arctic.

Seals, polar bears, musk oxen, ducks, geese, and fish were to be found on every side. These would have provided the explorers with light, heat, food, clothing, footgear, shelter, and boat coverings. Most important of all, the meat of the animals would have provided food in abundance—the sort of food that (we now know) prevents scurvy.

IT WAS NOT until 1854 that Hudson's Bay Company searchers, led by Dr. John Rae, found a group of Eskimos who said they had seen a large party of white men, several years before, dragging their boats and sleds over the ice to the southward. Later, they said, they had discovered the boats and the graves of a number of men. In proof of their story they produced silver spoons and forks which had belonged to the explorers. Dr. Rae obtained these, forwarded them to headquarters with his report, and was thereupon paid the reward. Everybody but Sir John's widow seems to have accepted the Rae report as proof that the entire party had perished.

Rae, one of the most ingenious and indefatigable searchers for the Franklin survivors, maintained his party by killing game in the same region where those he sought had died.

In recent years, Stefansson used the Rae hunting technique, but on the drifting pack where no one had ever tried it before. Whereas an Eskimo on the north coast of Alaska would not venture more than six or eight miles from shore, Stefansson deliberately set out for the northern tip of Banks Land on a journey that lasted three months. He maintains that anyone with a good pair of legs, good eyesight, and a dependable rifle can go anywhere in the Arctic and stay as long as his cartridges hold out.

Since there was not a single survivor of the Franklin expedition, and the Eskimos threw to the four winds their precious records, nothing definite is known of the hardships and sufferings of those who made the last march. So, in reconstructing the party's ill-fated journey, we can only be guided by the average behavior of others under similar conditions.

In the first place, although the Eskimos had lived in a fair degree of comfort in a rather inhospitable environment for perhaps a hundred generations; had obtained their vitamins chiefly from raw and cooked meat and fish; had traveled long distances to visit relatives and for other reasons during the winter months, and had obtained, in Arctic America, everything they needed, there is nothing to show that Sir John went out of his way to learn how the natives made all this possible. Also it is not apparent that he departed from the rather hide-bound customs of his white contemporaries and instructed his men in hunting and in sledging during the winter months. So the groundwork for scurvy—inactivity and lack of vitamins—was laid. And corned beef was not a good substitute for fresh meat.

Instead of building snow-houses at the end of each day on their retreat southward, the Franklin followers seem to have dragged heavy and cumbersome canvas tents on their sleds, setting them up each night and taking them down each morning. These were no doubt made of a single thickness of sail cloth, with no air space between an inner lining and the canvas. If so, the tents undoubtedly accumulated a coating of hoar-frost each night as the warm air from cooking operations and the breath of the sleepers congealed in the sub-zero temperature on the under side of the roof. This coating of ice had to be broken up and removed each morning as it would have added considerably to the weight of the tents. Even then the frozen canvas was difficult to fold and load on the sled.

If, on the other hand, the explorers had learned from the nearby Eskimos the simple rules for building a snow-house, they could have dispensed with their heavy and unwieldy tents, and could have been quite comfortable at night. If they had disrobed completely, and crept into caribou-skin sleeping bags, their clothing would have been dry at all times and they would have slept comfortably. If they had worn the Eskimo type of boot, their feet would not have been frozen. If they had hunted caribou and musk oxen during the winter they would have benefited from the two best preventives of scurvy, fresh meat and exercise. If they had not been too proud, presumably, to ask the aid of the nearby Eskimos in building *umiaks*, they need not have dropped on the trail from exhaustion brought about by dragging the ponderous wooden boats that were salvaged from the *EREBUS* and the *TERROR*. There is no evidence, however, that they encouraged visits from the natives. And the Eskimos undoubtedly were too scared by the advent of the powerful strangers, with their white-winged vessels, to make any overtures. From all

accounts they avoided the explorers at every turn.

IT WAS the expedition of Capt. Leopold McClintock which brought to light, in 1861, the fate of the Franklin followers and the course of their retreat. This expedition, outfitted by Lady Franklin (the 18th to be dispatched in search of her illustrious husband), was caught in the ice and carried some fourteen hundred miles by the drifting pack before their ship was freed by the breaking up of the floes. In February, the darkest and coldest month of the year, Capt. McClintock and Capt. Young set out to establish the route taken by the Franklin survivors and to make contact with the Eskimos in the vicinity of the North Magnetic Pole.

McClintock split his men into two parties. Lieut. Hobson took one group down the west coast of King William Land while McClintock set a more southerly course for the estuary of the Great Fish River. Starting out before daylight each morning the parties would travel steadily for several hours, eat their lunch in the lee of their sleds, and again take to the trail. At night they would build snow-houses in the Eskimo style, cook and eat their supper, dry out their clothing and foot-gear, spread their sleeping bags on the snow, and sleep the sleep of the weary traveler.

Crossing Wellington Strait to a village of snow-houses McClintock found a group of thirty or forty Eskimos who reiterated the story of the crushed Franklin vessels and the departure of the marooned survivors on their march of death. The natives also produced several pieces of silver plate bearing the crest or initials of Franklin, Crozier, and other officers. These McClintock purchased and took back to England.

The party continued on to the delta of the Great Fish River, but found no evidence there of the Franklin retreat. Returning to King William Land, McClintock came upon the skeleton of a white man on a ridge, and saw here and there a few fragments of clothing appearing through the snow. Concluding that the retreating party must have crossed the lowland of the cape, thus completing the discovery of the Northwest Passage, and that they would leave a record at the spot, the group made a diligent search, and finally discovered a small, partly demolished cairn. The Eskimos, however, apparently had ransacked this receptable of its valuable documents and thrown them away as mere scraps of paper.

Lieut. Hobson's party also found a cairn on the northwest coast of King William Land. This contained the only existing record of the Franklin expedition. It was dated May 28, 1847 (before the death of Sir John), and told briefly that the *Erebus* and the *Terror* had wintered in the ice northwest of King William Land; that they had sailed up Wellington Channel to Lat. 77° N., and had returned along the west coast of Cornwallis Island.

Later expeditions, including those of Capt. C. F. Hall and Lieut. Frederick Schwatka, were to add considerably to the total fund of information. Hall lived with the Eskimos of the Franklin area for more than two years, and this is the gist of what he learned of the survivors: Late in the autumn, many years before, on the west shore of King William Land, natives had found the graves of two white men. Five or six miles from this spot they had discovered another grave; and on a small island two miles off the coast the remains of five other white men, making eight in all. The following year, Hall was told, a party of Eskimos had found a large tent, the floor of which was completely covered with the bodies of white men. Two rowboats were found, with many skeletons lying all about. Wherever the natives found graves they dug them open to rob the dead.

Eighteen years after the McClintock search (which was made chiefly during the winter months when the ground was covered with snow), it occurred to Lieut. Schwatka, an American Army officer, that the west coast of King William Land could profitably be examined during the summer when there was little or no snow on the ground. Equipped with only a month's provisions, and relying in large measure for food upon the game to be found in the region, Lieut. Schwatka and three others set out in April from Hudson's Bay for the delta of the Great Fish River.

They were accompanied by 13 Eskimos. Their camp gear, ammunition, trading

goods, spare clothing, and food supplies were hauled by three dog teams. During the course of the expedition the Schwatka party killed 522 caribou and a number of musk oxen, polar bears and seals. They confirmed several previous discoveries, made others, and recovered from the natives numerous knives, forks, spoons, plates and other relics of the Franklin expedition.

AND SO the search went on. As recently as 1930 a Canadian flier, Major L. T. Burwash and his pilot, W. E. Gilbert, set out for the vicinity of the North Magnetic Pole on what, up to that time, was the most daring flight in the history of Canadian aviation. To the reports of McClintock, Rae, Hall, Schwatka, and others, Burwash and Gilbert wrote what may well be the last chapter.

It was a propitious year for wresting secrets from the ice-locked North. The exceptionally mild summer had bared ground that usually was covered with snow, and brought to light additional Franklin relics. From the cabin of their gray-winged Fokker plane, Burwash and Gilbert could see the Great White Desert, jagged and inhospitable, with its rough-hewn pressure ridges scintillating in the sun. Directly beneath, as on a moving carpet, they could see narrow lanes of gray-green water, strongly contrasted against the spotless white of the drifting ice-pack.

Circling about, they headed their plane toward King William Land. Selecting a fresh-water lake near the shore, Gilbert brought the seaplane to a landing. While Major Burwash explored the shore line, Gilbert and the others sought traces of the Franklin survivors farther inland. At one spot they found unmistakable evidence of a camp: Rotting stores and the stone walls of a warehouse. They also found a cairn not previously discovered by any searching party. This, however, had been rifled by wandering Eskimos. There were other evidences of a fairly large encampment, but no graves. At another location (probably that of the hospital) they found one large grave in which several bodies apparently had been buried. This grave was carefully and reverently covered over.

Their work on the ground completed, the members of the party returned to the plane, took off, and photographed with their aerial mapping camera the route over which the Franklin survivors, weakened by disease and exposure probably made their last march.

Many readers will ask: Why weren't more bones and skeletons found? Well, the natural route for the retreat lay along the coast. There the explorers could find driftwood for cooking their food, heating their tents, and drying their clothing and footgear. The land-fast ice that lay between the shore and the drifting pack was comparatively level, and broken only by a tide-crack here and there. It was also covered by a thin layer of snow, packed tighly by the prevailing northeast winds. Another advantage of the coast route was that, in a region where their compasses undoubtedly went "haywire", due to the influence of the North Magnetic Pole, it was easy to follow the shoreline in a southeasterly direction.

If a man died in camp his body no doubt was covered with snow; if he was overtaken by death on the trail, the standing order of the commander, it may be presumed, was that the body be left where it lay. In either case, the summer sun would melt the ice in the immediate vicinity of the body, which would then sink to a depth of three or four feet. During the following winter the water would freeze, thus encasing the body in ice. In the years that followed, one of two things might happen: The ice might melt, allowing the body to sink to the ocean floor; or the floe might increase in thickness. If it froze to the maximum thickness of twelve feet, and was then raftered onto a pressure ridge forty or fifty feet high, it is quite possible that the body, still in its icy casket, is today drifting about among the ice fields.

At any rate, the expeditions of McClintock, Rae, Hall, Schwatka, and Burwash have given us all that we shall probably ever know of the fate of the Franklin followers. We know how the explorers perished; where; and with some reasonable degree of certainty, when. We know the route over which they staged their losing race with Death. All honor to their memory!

THE SLOW DEATH

By EDWARD S. FOX

He hated the cold. He hated the North. Yet for twenty years old Jed Donaldson fought the frozen earth for the *Big Strike*. Now he had it. Now he was happy—but sometimes happy, whiskey-soaked sourdoughs talk too much.

OLD JED DONALDSON struggled slowly awake. He lay on the bed fully-clothed, even to mud-caked boots, and blinked about the room. He had had too much to drink last night. His head throbbed and his eyes felt as though someone had poured hot oil in their sockets.

He turned his head until his gaze fell on his pack in the corner. With an oath he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. The pack was open and its contents strewn over the floor.

Jed plunged forward and fell to his knees beside it. His trembling fingers searched through his scattered belongings, swiftly, grimly; then he sank back on his heels staring at them in dismay.

He rose to his feet quickly. He went to the window and looked out. The sky

was leaden gray and in the distance he could see the snow-covered hills surrounding Glacier. The street below his window was nearly deserted. It was early.

Jed scooped up his heavy mackinaw from the floor and slipped into it. He left his room and turned down the short corridor. He ran down the stairs to the hotel lobby and walked swiftly through an open door that led to the bar. Bartender Hank Greenlea, drying glasses, paused when Jed dropped heavily into a chair at a table. He looked at Jed's face and silently brought a glass and bottle and set them in front of the old prospector.

Jed shook his head and pushed the bottle away. Hank drew up another chair and sat down.

"Did I talk last night?" Jed's voice was tight with anger.

Hank rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Some."

"Why in hell didn't you stop me?" Jed flung at his friend.

"I did," Hank said. "I gave you a slug that would sink a grizzly and carried you off and put you to bed."

"What'd I say before that?"

"Something about gold. And you showed your sack of dust." Hank paused. "Why."

"Someone came up to my room and rifled my pack while I was asleep," Jed said disgustedly. "They got my dust and the samples I took over to the assay office yesterday. That wasn't all they was lookin' for, though. They must've thought I had a map telling of the location of the strike. Who was standin' near me at the bar?"

Hank thought a minute. "Couple of strangers. A big tall fellow with a patch over his eye and a rough, red-headed gent."

"Know who they are?"

"I heard their names were Kirby and Burke. Kirby's the big red-headed fellow. Burke's the gent with the patch."

Jed stared at Greenlea. "Tenderfeet?"

Hank shrugged. "Maybe, but still plenty tough."

"Was there anyone else could've heard?"

Greenlea shook his head.

"That's them then." Jed's fist smashed the table. "Damn the luck. I should've stayed out of here, but it's been three months since I had a taste of liquor and I was dry."

Hank pushed the bottle across the table. "You better take one now. You look like you needed it."

Jed rose to his feet. "I need food," he said. "It's a long way back to my shack."

Greenlea looked at him in surprise. "You ain't going back today are you?"

Jed nodded.

"There's a blizzard brewing," Greenlea warned.

"I can make it."

"What about Burke and Kirby? They might try to follow you."

Jed buttoned his mackinaw across his chest. A stocky, grizzled little man he was wearing corduroy breeches and boots laced to his knees. With a shrug he pulled his fur hat down over his ears and turned to the door.

He stepped outside and for a moment stood on the plankwalk before the hotel. He could smell the snow in the air. The leaden skies confirmed Greenlea's prediction of a blizzard.

The cold cut deep into Jed's bones, and he shivered. Years ago he hadn't minded the cold so much but now it bothered him. More and more lately he dreamed of the day when he could go south, far to the south where there was sunshine and warmth.

That day didn't seem so far off finally. For twenty-odd years he had clung to these mountains, making a measly prospector's wage. Now, at last, he had struck gold. No bonanza. But enough to make him rich. To get him out of this cold dreary land he had come to hate.

TWENTY MINUTES later he returned to his room. It took only a few minutes to gather up his belongings and strap his pack. He sat down on the bed and, with his hunting knife, pried off the heel of one boot. He had hollowed a cavity into the underneath and now he poured several gold nuggets into the palm of his hand. Drawing a bandanna from his mackinaw, he dumped the nuggets into the handkerchief and tied a knot around them. Then he pounded his heel back on his boot and, rising, picked up his pack.

He took his rifle and snowshoes from under the bed.

Downstairs again he stepped into the bar and tossed the bandanna onto the counter in front of Greenlea. "That helps pay for the last two grubstakes, Hank. Just in case I don't see you again."

"You're crazy to start out in a blizzard with them tough hombres maybe trailin' you." Greenlea shook his head, frowning.

"You seen them this morning?"

"No."

"I ain't neither," Jed said. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they was only after my dust."

Jed slipped his arms into the pack harness and settled it firmly on his back. If he hung around Glacier until the blizzard was over he might be snowbound for weeks or even months. He had built his shack over the mouth of his mine and could hole up there all winter and be working it. But he had to get in before the snow got too deep.

Jed's step quickened. It would take a good ten hours to reach his shack. He glanced up at the sky. The light had faded somewhat as the clouds dropped and thickened. The air was biting cold and now snow-flurries, borne onward by a wind that swept down from the north, blotted out whole sections of the hills.

When he reached the first line of hills he stopped and looked back. He could make out the low drab buildings of Glacier squatting clumsily on the valley floor. Then he stiffened. Two men were just leaving town.

He swung around, frowning uneasily, and set out down the trail again. Spruce dotted the snow-blanketed hills, grew denser the deeper he penetrated their silent fastness. On the next summit he stopped to glance back.

With a start he saw the two men less than half a mile away. They had stopped and seemed to be waiting. He couldn't make out who they were.

Jed stepped behind a spruce and peered back. Almost instantly the two men started up again. Jed turned away down the trail.

Twice more in the next half hour he spotted the two men. They were keeping their distance, speeding up when he quickened his pace, falling back when he slowed it. Jed swore out loud.

The wind had begun to rise. It was moaning through the tree tops now, whistling down through gaps between the hills. Another mile Jed followed the trail, then abruptly left it and turned north, striking up a shallow valley. No trail to follow here. Just landmarks. A windswept rock. A clump of spruce. He knew every inch of this country. He could find his way blindfolded through these hills. He had done it on many a black night with a quart of rot-gut liquor in his belly.

He was halfway up the valley when he saw the men turn off the trail to follow. They had closed still further the gap separating them. There was no pretense now. He knew it was Burke and Kirby. And they knew he knew it.

Jed stepped behind a boulder. He leaned against its sloping side and sighted down the barrel of his rifle. His finger squeezed the trigger. The crashing roar of the shot swept down the valley. A crescent of snow spurted up just to the left of the men. They vanished behind trees.

Jed levered a fresh shell into his rifle. He had given them fair warning. If they were tenderfeet, as Greenlea had said, they might take heed.

But when he stepped out from behind his boulder and started up the valley again he saw the men fall in behind him at the same slow, relentless pace.

Jed's face was grim as he left the valley and entered a shallow canyon. The snow was deep here. He selected his spot carefully. It was two hundred yards from the mouth of the canyon. He glanced up at the rim twenty feet over his head. Then he knelt behind a snowbank and waited. It was snowing harder now, but not enough to obscure his vision.

MINUTES passed and the only sound to fill the canyon was the soft cry of the wind as it swept across the rim. Jed's snowshoes lay beside him. His pack was still on his back. Both hands clutched his rifle.

A quarter of an hour passed and there was no sign of the men. Jed's mouth was set. He thought of the twenty years he had prospected these hills without luck.

Of his hopes, and disappointments, and failures. Of his determination to die before he would reveal the location of his mine. This time he wouldn't give Kirby and Burke any warning.

Jed half-rose from behind the snowbank. He strained his eyes and ears for the first sight—or sound—

It came from above him. The first faint warning. The only warning. A little avalanche of snow trickling down into the canyon.

As Jed started up at the rim a great hulking shape came hurtling down at him. He tried to leap clear but he was a split second too late. A pair of hob-nailed boots crashed against his chest, knocked the rifle spinning from his hands and slammed him into the snowbank.

The snowbank cushioned his fall. Jed caught a glimpse of the man's face and the black patch over his eye as he pitched forward across him. Gasping for breath Jed wriggled desperately out from under Burke's body and leaped to his feet.

Silently Burke came erect and closed in. Jed ducked and dove at Burke's legs. He hit them hard and Burke went down. Jed scrambled to his knees, his fist slashing at Burke's face. He lunged erect and kicked Burke in the head.

With an oath Burke grasped Jed's ankle and twisted it. Pain shot up Jed's leg and he sprawled in the snow. From a kneeling position Burke flung himself forward.

Jed rolled. And once more managed to free himself of Burke's hands. He sprang up and started for his rifle lying in the snow a dozen feet away. He took two steps. Then a crushing weight slammed him between the shoulders and he plunged to his knees again. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of Kirby's brutish, red-haired face. He tried to free himself. A fist crashed against the back of his neck. He tried to reach the long hunting-knife beneath his mackinaw. His fingers closed on the handle, drew it halfway from its scabbard.

A second sledge-hammer blow thudded against his neck. A third filled his head with a loud roaring sound. A fourth sent red streaks of fire shooting in front of his eyes. From a long distance off he heard Burke's voice saying, "Don't kill him, you fool."

He didn't have the strength to draw his knife. Those blows against his neck had paralyzed his muscles. A fog had risen in front of his eyes. But the blows stopped. He was aware of the men standing over him. He felt them stripping off his pack and doing something to his hands.

His head was beginning to clear. He lay on his side, hands bound behind his back, looking up at the two men. Their eyes were flint-hard as they stared back at him coldly.

These men were no tenderfeet. He and Greenlea had figured it wrong.

"Get up," Burke ordered.

Jed lay still. With an impatient grunt Kirby reached down and, grasping him by his mackinaw, dragged him to his feet. With the flat of his hand Kirby slapped his face until his head began to roll groggily on his shoulders.

"You can save yourself from being beaten to death if you take us to your mine." Burke's voice sounded far away.

Kirby was using the heel of his hand now. His blows were sharp, vicious. Jed knew he wouldn't have any head left if he kept this up much longer. He could taste blood. One ear was smashed and raw and his jaw felt as though it were broken.

"What do you say, Donaldson?"

Burke's voice was growing dimmer. The light was fading.

"I'll take you there," Jed gasped.

The blows stopped and he sank weakly into the snow. He fought against the black void closing in on him.

Jed was clinging to one tiny ray of hope: that he could escape from them in the storm, or in the dark when night descended. Take them to the mine? He wanted to laugh hysterically.

"Get up," Burke commanded. "Get up and get going."

Jed struggled to his feet. He swayed drunkenly.

They left his snowshoes and rifle beside his pack. Jed walked in the lead. Burke came next. Then Kirby. The snow was deep.

Jed clenched his teeth, the dull rage in him growing with each step. Now the only sound was the crunching of their feet in the snow and the labored breath-

ing of the two men behind him. Then the storm closed in around them in earnest. One minute snow-flurries swept down over the canyon rim. The next the canyon was filled with a solid mass of white.

Jed hunched his shoulders against the snow-flakes sifting down his neck inside his mackinaw. They came out of the canyon into a wide valley and here the full force of the wind struck them. It was an icy blast that tore at their clothing and bit deep into their bones.

Jed shivered. In spite of the exertion of walking he feld cold. He hated it. He had stood it twenty years. In another six months, or a year at most, he had planned to leave it, forever.

At the end of half an hour they stopped for a brief rest. When Kirby sat down in the snow Burke cursed him to his feet.

"You fool, you'll freeze to death. Keep moving around."

They went on. They passed over patches of windswept ground that were nearly bare, at other times they had to plow through drifts waist deep. An inch or two of snow had fallen. It was fine and powderly and cold. It clung to his clothing and stung his cheek. It filled his eyes and nose and mouth.

HOUR after hour they moved ahead. Jed's legs began to ache. He complained of the lack of circulation in his hands but the men told him roughly to keep going. He worked his wrists and fingers in an effort to keep them from being frost-bitten. In an effort too to free himself. But the ropes wouldn't stretch.

It was sometime in the late afternoon when Burke called a halt. "How much farther?" he asked. He was cold and angry and in an ugly mood.

"We're about halfway," Jed answered calmly.

Kirby swore. He looked up at the sky, stamping his feet. "Damn this snow. Don't it ever stop?"

"Sometime it lasts a week." Jed smiled crookedly. "Sometimes a month."

"Let's get the hell there before we freeze," Burke said savagely.

It began to grow dark an hour later. Burke stopped. "We'll have to camp for the night." He pointed to some trees. "Over there."

They cleared a small patch of ground under the trees and Kirby built a fire. They stood over it to thaw out. Jed stood with his back to the fire, warming his hands. The circulation began to come back into them. The cold began to leave his body.

Then they sat before the fire silently. They had no blankets. They had no food. Darkness settled in around them. Wind whistled through the trees. Snow sifted down through the branches and fell hissing into the fire.

Kirby brought wood to last through the night. He bound Jed's feet. Then Burke fell into a doze while Kirby stood guard. When Burke awoke Kirby leaned his back against a tree and slept.

There was little sleep for Jed. His legs were cramped and his arms were stiff from being trussed up so long. He sat on a log, facing the fire. The night passed slowly.

At the first faint light of day Burke and Kirby rose. They untied his feet, then had to walk him around the fire several times, one on either side, holding him up, before he was able to stand. Just for an instant then they turned their backs on him.

At a stumbling run Jed started away through the trees. He reeled through some underbrush and plunged into a snowbank. He floundered desperately to break through it. In two bounds Kirby reached him, whirled him around and drove his fist into his mouth. Jed fell. Kirby kicked him in the ribs.

"Get up," he shouted hoarsely.

Jed struggled to his feet.

"Try that again," Kirby snarled, "and you'll get your brains knocked out."

Burke came up and Kirby pushed Jed roughly through the snowbank. They moved out from under the trees and stared up the valley. It was still snowing and the wind had reached gale proportions. A good twenty inches of snow had fallen during the night.

Jed plunged into a second drift. He fought his way through it. The wind tore at his face. Snow blinded his eyes. At the end of thirty minutes Burke was forced to call the first halt. He was breathing hard. Kirby stood with head bowed against the wind. It had grown

colder. It didn't take a man long to freeze to death in this weather, Jed thought dully. He felt it eating into his bones, numbing his flesh.

They pressed on after a few minutes of rest. The snow was up to their waists and they worked through it one slow step at a time. Every half hour Burke called a halt. Both he and Kirby were spent. Jed was past feeling anything. They came to the valley's end and started climbing. It took them three hours to go a mile.

"How much farther is it?" Kirby gasped when they stopped halfway up the slope.

Jed didn't answer. Kirby had sat down in the snow.

"Get up," Burke ordered.

Kirby looked up at him listlessly and Burke reached down and dragged him to his feet. Jed turned away and started climbing again.

They toiled painfully through the raging blizzard. They passed from one small valley into another. Each one looked alike. They couldn't see more than a hundred yards in any direction. Their steps dragged.

When they stopped the next time Kirby lay down in the snow. His face was gaunt and pale, his eyes dull. Burke stood over his partner, swaying. He tried to draw Kirby to his feet. Kirby knocked his hand away and sank back heavily.

"Let me rest a while," he muttered thickly. "You go ahead. I'll follow in a minute."

Burke stared down at him. Snow was already beginning to cover Kirby. It clung to his eyebrows, settled on his face. Jed waited tensely. Burke kicked Kirby.

"Leave me alone," Kirby said weakly. His voice rose irritably. "I'll be along in a minute, I tell you. I just want to rest a while."

"You'll be dead in thirty minutes," Burke snarled.

Kirby yawned and closed his eyes. Burke turned and looked at Jed. He didn't say anything.

They left Kirby there and struck out again. Jed wondered how much farther he could go, how much more of this punishment he could take. There was a limit to his endurance somewhere.

He lost all track of time. Or motion. He'd lost all sense of pain as well. His movements were like those of an automatum. He stumbled and fell. Burke waited silently for him to get up. He didn't have the strength to curse now.

Twice more they stopped to rest. The third time Burke sank weakly into the snow. He lay back in a drift, looking up at Jed. He tried to rise, but couldn't. Fear came into his eyes. He was licked and he knew it.

He raised his rifle slowly, painfully. Jed flung himself aside as the shot roared out. He lay in the snow, panting. He waited. No sound came from Burke. Five, then ten, minutes passed. He began to feel drowsy. He shook it off. Then his eyes closed. He opened them quickly.

Now he rose to his feet slowly. Another minute of that and he knew he would drop off into a coma from which there was no awakening.

Burke lay where he had fallen, his rifle buried in the snow beside him. Jed stood over him briefly. Burke was finished. He and Kirby had been tough, but not tough enough, by God.

Wearily Jed turned away. He turned at right angles to the direction they had been following. His step quickened. New life flowed into his legs, gave him strength for the last short stretch of trail.

A thousand feet from the spot where Burke had fallen he came to his shack. With his shoulder he pushed open the door and fell inside. He kicked the door shut and looked around. Going to a shelf he took down a long-bladed knife with his teeth.

He stuck the point in a crack in the board floor, sat down with his back to it and sawed his bound hands against the sharp blade. In a minute the ropes fell away. With a groan he brought his arms around in front of him and rubbed them. He examined his hands for frostbite.

Then he stood up. He was smiling triumphantly when he set about lighting a fire and putting out food. He was wondering what Burke and Kirby would say if they could know that last night, and for the last six hours, they had never been more than half a mile or a mile from his cabin.

SKIN-GAME

By JOHN BEAMES

Honest Avery Ryder was fresh-faced, straight-backed, and twenty-two. Hardly the type of man you'd pick to back your play against Cat Creek's three most villainous characters.

A HEAVY overnight rain had washed away the surface soil and exposed the nugget. It lay gleaming softly in the afternoon sunlight in full view of anyone passing along the trail to Cat Creek.

Flash Dulin was going that way. Flash did not dig for gold. He found it easier to take it from those who had. He was a tall, high-shouldered, angular man, with large mobile hands and sensitive fingertips.

Good reports had come from the Cat Creek field, and he had become somewhat too well known in Wayo, and so he was on his way to see what easy pickings there might be elsewhere.

He encountered Tony Perez where the

trail came in from the McCoon diggings. Tony was small, dark and hatchet-faced. He did not dig for gold either, but took a professional interest in sluice boxes. He had done a little work in that line at McCoon, and was moving on before things got too hot.

He and Flash were acquaintances only, not friends. Flash's pale green eyes narrowed, and he said in a sharp voice, "What are you doin' here?"

Black-eyed Tony stared back defiantly. "I got so much right as you have to go where I want," he snapped.

"You goin' to Cat Creek?"

"It is my business where I go."

Flash tried diplomacy. "You don't interfere with me," he suggested, "and I don't know nothin' about you, eh?"

"Dat is a deal," answered Tony promptly.

Two men who have every reason to distrust one another profoundly may yet walk together on a lonely trail for company. The pair did so, and even talked guardedly, until Tony broke off in midsentence, his eyes fastened on a faint yellow gleam in the gully below.

Alertness and keen observation are necessary in Flash's profession, and it was only a fraction of a second later that he saw what Tony saw. In another instant his long legs were trying to overtake Tony's short ones.

"Stand back," roared a deep, harsh voice.

They looked up to see a man across the gully holding a rifle on them. He was thick-bodied and shaggy, and his small yellow eyes glared out from under bushy grey eyebrows.

He was known as Mukluk Todd, pioneer sourdough, a morose and solitary man whose sole, burning passion was gold.

"I seen her first," he asserted.

Flash and Tony had their weapons out instantly. All three converged upon the nugget until they formed a triangle with it in the centre, each man determined that the precious thing should belong to him alone.

Yet not one dared stoop to pick it up.

"I seen her first," repeated Todd stubbornly.

"No, me," insisted Tony.

"No sooner than me," declared Flash.

"I see her before you do," snarled Tony, his thin lips curling back from yellow teeth.

Flash worked up a smile. He said in his most persuasive tones. "Well, boys, it seems we all seen it at the same time. I guess about all we can do is divide her up even." He took a short step forward.

"Leave her lay," warned Todd in a hoarse growl, "she's mine."

"Let's be reasonable about it," coaxed Flash. "We can't leave her lay there."

"Go on about your business, then, I'll take care of her," retorted Todd.

"I ain't givin' up my rights," said Flash.

"I have my right also, don't forget," reminded Tony.

The three glared back and forth in mutual hatred.

Whistling cheerfully and stepping jauntily along came Avery Ryder, bound from Cat Creek to Wayo for a load of supplies for himself and partner.

He was fresh-faced, straight-backed and twenty-two. His manner was easy going and his direct glance friendly and open. He was unarmed.

He looked curiously at the trio in the gully, and then his eye caught the alluring gleam of gold. He came bounding down for a closer look.

THEY were too absorbed to notice him until he was almost upon them, and then all their weapons swung in his direction.

He halted and grinned. "Hey, you're makin' me nervous," he said. "One of them things might go off. Say, that looks like a nugget."

"She's mine," proclaimed Todd, "I see her first."

"I see first," protested Tony.

"We all seen her at the same time," explained Flash.

"Well, she's a beaut. You fellers certainly struck it lucky. Wisht I'd come along a little sooner. You fellers partners, eh?"

"No, we ain't," said Flash.

"Never was," added Tony.

"Never goin' to be," Todd clinched it.

Avery shook his head. "That's funny, ain't it? I guess you better be partners. What's the sense lookin' ugly at each

other? Just go shares and be friends."

"You go on about your business," growled Todd.

"Ok," answered Avery easily. "If that's the way you feel about it. She ain't my nugget anyway."

"No, wait," said Flash. "We can't none of us trust the other with her. How if you'd tote her to Wayo for us? We'll make it right with you."

Avery looked around the greedy, suspicious, angry faces. There was murder in the air, and he was unarmed.

"I'm in a hurry," he said, "and she ain't my nugget anyhow."

Todd intervened. "You pick her up like he said," he commanded.

"Yes, pick her up," snapped Tony peremptorily.

Avery shrugged his shoulders good naturedly. "Bossy bunch, you are. All right, if it'll be any help."

He went down on his knees, scraped away the dirt around the nugget, and dragged the whole thing to the light.

"Holy cats," he exclaimed in wonder, "I never seen one this big. Must weigh all of ten pounds. Looks like a man's hand, don't she? See, here's the fingers, only there's six or seven of 'em, and all twisted up. This here's the thumb. The golden hand, I'd call her."

"Call her what you like," rumbled Todd, "but put her in your pack and let's get movin'."

They made him go on ahead and followed, watching him and each other with unsleeping suspicion. They could see the bulge of the nugget between his shoulders and their eyes regarded it hungrily.

Todd began to talk to himself in a grating mumble. "Seen her first, but couldn't get to her quick enough. Seen 'em too—seen 'em before they seen her. She's mine. Goin' to have her—have her in spite of hell."

Tony brooded, fingering the big clasp knife in his pocket. He carried a rifle, but preferred the knife. It was swift and silent. In his career he had stabbed two men with it; in the back; in the dark. The time to use it would come with night.

Flash favored more subtle methods. "How about a hand of stud?" he suggested. "Just between us three? High man take all, eh?"

ARCTIC DESTINY

It is an Eskimo belief that a hair seal will allow himself to be killed because he needs something which he can get only from the hunter—a drink of fresh water. This is why a dipperful of water is always poured into the mouth of a dead seal when he is brought ashore. The belief is that if the hunter fails to do this, all the other seals will learn about it, and no other seal will ever allow himself to be killed by that hunter; they will choose someone who will give them a drink.

The polar bear, according to Eskimo belief, is unable to make for himself certain tools. The male needs knives and bow-drills; and the female is eager to get a woman's knife, skin scraper, and needle case. In either case, the soul of the bear accompanies the skin into the hunter's house, and stays there for several days. The skin is hung up, and with it the tools which the bear (according to sex) needs. When the soul leaves the hunter's house, it takes away the souls of the tools and uses them thereafter. If the bear's soul has been properly treated, it will report the fact to the land of polar bears to which it returns—and the other polar bears will be eager to be killed by so considerate a hunter.

"Not if you deal," said Tony shortly.

"Don't gamble with no crooks," snorted Todd.

They came at length to a small creek flowing in a wooded bottom.

Avery halted. "Don't know how far you fellers is goin'," he remarked pleasantly, "but I think I gone far enough for today."

"We want to get to Wayo quick," demurred Flash.

"Good place for camp," said Tony, looking around. Here was excellent cover into which an active man could slip if he were able to get his hands on the nugget.

"We'll camp," said Todd decisively. He had been tramping uphill and down all day, his body bent forward at the hips, his topaz eyes fixed on the ground. He was no longer young, and his legs were stiffening.

Avery lit a fire and put on a billy. "Come on, boys," he said, "let's be friends. Belly up and eat."

His words had no effect on the current of suspicion and hatred flowing between the three and now beginning to include him. Each man ate by himself and there

was no conversation.

Dusk drifted softly in upon them and it became almost dark under the trees.

Todd settled himself with his back against a tree, a blanket over his shoulders and his rifle across his knees.

"Put that there nugget where I can see her," he directed. "Put her right beside the fire."

Avery took the golden hand from his pack and laid it where the flames lit it up. The men's eyes lingered on it hungrily.

Todd began to mutter in his beard; Tony's hand caressed the knife in his pocket and his legs twitched; Flash brought out a deck of cards and ruffled them alluringly.

"How about a few hands of stud?" he wheedled. No one paid any attention to him.

AVERY laughed. "We look funny, settin' here like hungry dogs around a bone. Well, she won't run away on us. I'll cover her up and we'll lay down and get some sleep, eh?"

"Leave her lay," said Todd menacingly.

"Have it your own way," said Avery, "I'm losin' no sleep on account of her." He unrolled his blanket and lay down.

First Flash and then Tony followed his example, but Todd continued to sit with his back against the tree and his brooding eyes fixed on the nugget.

The firelight died, the embers turned to white ash, but still the golden hand gleamed softly in the northern twilight.

Tony writhed under his blanket as gently as a snake, the claspknife open in his hand. He peered at Todd. The old prospector did not stir. He eased himself up on his elbow and looked over at Flash and Avery. Slow, steady breathing came from both.

He turned his head back toward Todd, and saw the muzzle of the man's gun pointed straight at him. With a muttered curse he sank down again.

Now Flash stirred. After cautious reconnaissance, he slewed his body and began to drag himself along the ground toward the nugget.

"Leave her lay," came Todd's deep whisper, "I'm awatchin' you."

Flash rolled back and stretched out with a deep sigh.

It was dawn again in an hour from the onset of dusk. Tony gave up the pretence of being asleep and sat up with an impatient snort. Flash snapped upright in an instant. Todd regarded both with malevolent eyes.

They turned and stared enviously at the sleeping Avery. "Hey, wake up," shouted Todd.

Avery opened drowsy eyes. "What's eatin' you?" he complained. "It ain't time to get up yet."

"We want to get movin'," said Flash. "This stayin' awake all night ain't good for our health."

Tony grinned sourly, but there was no change in Todd's stony face. "I don't hardly ever sleep nohow," he remarked. "I can get all the rest I need settin' up. You fellers best remember that."

"I could get along fine if I never seen none of you again," said Avery, getting up and beginning to prepare breakfast.

The sleepless night had worsened the humor of the trio, and they vented it on Avery.

"Don't you try and run for it," warned Todd. "A bullet can go faster than you can. You just keep goin' slow and steady if you want to live long."

"See here," said Avery, "this here's your nugget, not mine, and I ain't no damn thief. I'll leave her right here, and you can do what you damn please with her."

But they would not permit that, but made him go on before them, and he had an uneasy feeling that their weapons were all pointed at his back.

"Somebody's comin' up the trail," said Flash presently.

"Turn into the bush," ordered Todd. "We don't want to have you blabbin'." Avery obeyed.

From cover they watched a party of a dozen or so men go by in the direction of Cat Creek. When the coast was clear they returned to the trail. They met no one else and nobody overtook them.

When they camped at noon, Avery lay down to take a nap. This irritated them all.

"If we can't sleep why should you?" snarled Flash.

Tony prodded him with the muzzle of

a rifle. "Wake up, you. No sleep on dis damn trail."

"You're all crazy as bedbugs," snapped Avery. "Why can't you act sensible? To hell with you all."

"Get up and get goin'," growled Todd.

By late afternoon the trio were stumbling with weariness and Wayo was still some twenty miles away.

"We'll camp," decided Todd when they came to one of the regular camping grounds beside a creek.

"Too many people up and down this trail," objected Flash. "We might have a bunch in on us any time."

"We go back in the bush," suggested Tony eagerly.

They pushed on up the creek therefore until they came to a little hollow surrounded on all sides by thick bush. Here they ordered Avery to make a fire. None of them daring for a moment to take his eyes off the golden hand, they converted him into a servant, making him cook the meal and serve each man his portion.

They did not, however, prevent him unrolling his blanket and lying down.

Todd took up his usual position, leaning against a tree. Flash and Tony copied his example, each at a little distance from the other. The golden hand formed the hub of a wheel of which they were the spokes.

After a few moments Avery fell into a sound sleep, and it was several hours later that he woke and looked around. The sun was already well up, and the long rays slanted through the trees and lit the scene.

Flash was leaning over, his elbow propped on a dead log, his long-barrelled revolver against his chest, his eyes closed. Tony was bent forward, his head almost between his knees, his shoulders jerking with each breath. Todd was motionless, his head back against the treetrunk and his beard sticking out. As Avery stared at him, his eyes opened a little and he motioned with his hand. "Beat it," he said in a whisper.

With the old prospector's rifle upon him, Avery hastily gathered up his pack and blanket and slipped quietly away. When he reached the trail he broke into a run, but had only gone a couple of hundred yards when he pulled up sharply.

SMOOTH RUNNING

Other metals (such as German silver) may run more easily than steel over snow at low temperatures, but steel lasts longer. Another practical sledge runner is ice, but the water can be applied only to a solid plank sledge runner, such as Peary used. An iced runner also needs to have the wearing surface renewed before each journey, but this requires only a few minutes. And the hauling weight of a sledge so shod, at 50° below zero, F., is probably only a quarter as much as one fitted with steel runners.

He stood for a few moments in deep thought, then threw his head up resolutely, and circled back on high ground until he came out on a low ridge from which he could look down upon the camp.

He saw Todd heave himself up and move cautiously toward the nugget, his rifle pointing first at one and then at the other of his sleeping rivals.

HE STOOPED to lift the golden hand. Tony's head came up with a jerk. He sprang to his feet, the knife gleaming in his hand. Todd straightened up, tried to ward him off, and went down with the blade sunk to the hilt in his chest.

Tony did not pause to look at him, but pounced on the nugget, snatched it up and ran.

Flash woke, reached for his gun. He fired two shots. Tony fell on his face, his fingers scrabbling at the ground.

Flash got up, walked over and contemplated the body for a moment. Then he picked up the nugget and returned to Todd. The old prospector lay on his back, his arms flung wide.

For the first time, Flash became aware that Avery was not there. His eyes searched the surrounding bush. Avery lay close.

The tall gambler seemed undecided for a few minutes. Finally he laid his own gun in the limp fingers of the old prospector, taking Todd's rifle in exchange. He went over and took another look at Tony. Then he hurriedly put the golden hand in his pack, slung it over his shoulder, and took the trail for Wayo.

Avery followed. Flash was suspicious,

scouting the trail ahead and often looking back over his shoulder. He slipped under cover whenever he saw anyone coming. Avery found it easier to hold a parallel course through the bush, and managed to keep his man pretty well in sight.

About a mile from Wayo, in a place where the bush grew very thick, Flash turned off the trail. Avery, following with the utmost caution, found him digging at the foot of a tall spruce. Flash rose, carefully strewed spruce needles over the disturbed ground and moved slowly away, looking back over his shoulder.

Avery followed him a little way, then returned hurriedly to the spot. A little probing in the soft black muck brought the golden hand to light. He carried it about half a mile and then reburied it.

He went on to Wayo. The place consisted of about a hundred log buildings, some of size but the majority mere shacks, scattered about on the river bank. Dusty trails wound in and out among them.

Avery went around through the bush until he was close to the main store and then darted into the place. He pulled out a skimpy poke, had the gold dust it contained weighed, and made his purchases. These made up a load of about a hundred pounds, which he would pack to Cat Creek.

He left the store and ran almost at once into Flash. They regarded each other in silence, Flash wearing his professional poker face, and Avery with a little twinkle in his eye.

At last he asked innocently, "Did you bring the nugget in?"

"What nugget?" was the bland rejoiner.

Avery grinned. "No nugget, eh? Where's the other two?"

Flash stared over Avery's head. "I don't know what you're talkin' about," he said. "Who are you anyway, I never seen you before?"

Avery was about to make a hot reply, but checked himself. "So that's the way of it?" he nodded. "I guess I don't know you neither. My mistake."

He chuckled as he walked away. The thing had been Flash's own doing. He had no feeling whatever about Todd and Tony: they had not used him well, and he did not feel they were any loss to anybody. For Flash he felt acute dislike.

But loyalty to his partner was of the heart of his code. He and Gerry Rolfe had been friends from boyhood, they had joined the gold rush together, and had been partners through good and bad—mostly bad—ever since. He was determined that Gerry should share with him the golden hand. Just now he was tired and would have a long hard pack trip ahead of him for which he needed to rest up. He went looking for a place to sleep.

That evening two excited chekachos came panting into Wayo. They had been puddling about in a creek experienced sourdoughs had long given up as barren and had run across the bodies of two men. The mounted policeman stationed at Wayo questioned them, and then set out with a party to investigate.

He was back next day with the bodies and the settlement filled with excited talk. The dead men were well known, and it was the general opinion that Tony had tried to rob the old prospector and got himself shot in consequence.

The mysterious part of the business was how a man stabbed through the heart had found strength to fire two shots. Some asserted that there must be a third man concerned.

Flash had already disappeared. Avery picked up his pack and slipped out of town as unobtrusively as possible.

He had gone hardly a mile when Flash stepped out of the bush in his path. The gambler's face was pale and his green eyes had a feverish light.

"You know something about this here," he shot at Avery.

"I don't know you—you said so yourself," returned Avery.

FLASH pulled out a small revolver. you want to get this?" he threatened.

"That's different," said Avery. "Well, what do you want to know?"

"What did you do with the nugget? You're the only one knows about it. You must've dug it up."

"Well, maybe I did," admitted Avery after a pause. "But if you shoot me you'll never know where it's at."

"Move off the trail," directed Flash. "We're goin' to talk about this in a quiet place."

With the gun pressed against his ribs,

Avery walked back into the bush.

Flash began to talk in a different tone. "You show me where she lays and we'll go partners in her," he offered. "Them other two damn fools killed each other, so we don't need to bother about 'em. This'll just be between me and you."

"Even steven?" temporized Avery.

"Even steven, cross my heart," Flash assured him.

"All right, I'll go get her."

"Not by yourself, you ain't."

Avery moved off, carefully skirting the spot where he had buried the nugget.

"Here, where you goin'?" asked Flash suspiciously.

"I cached her right on the edge of town by a big stump," replied Avery. "I wanted to have her where I could get her easy."

"If you figure to get close to town and then make a run for it, you better get another notion," warned Flash. "I'll shoot you quick as look at you."

Avery halted. "If you won't let me take you where it is and won't let me go get it, she'll just have to lay there," he said.

"Well, go on, but mind what I told you."

They entered the wilderness of stumps and bushes that surrounded the settlement. Avery was beginning to ease the straps off his pack so that he could drop it and run.

"Stop right there," snapped Flash. "You're leadin' me wrong. You wouldn't come this close to town before buryin' the nugget. I'm givin' you your last chance. Either show me where she lays right now or you're a dead man."

Avery affected to be looking for landmarks. "It's a little over this way," he said. "All these here stumps look so much alike."

He moved away. Perhaps he would have a better chance of escape by diving into thick bush.

As he led the way back to the forest, a man appeared in front of them. Then another, and a third.

One of them shouted, "That's him."

Flash turned on Avery. "You led me into this," he snarled.

Avery whirled and leaped for a bush. He heard the gun crack. Something struck him a hard blow on the back and sent him sprawling on his face.

He heard somebody shouting, "Get him, get him."

Guns crackled, there were confused shouts from all directions.

Avery slipped off his pack and cautiously rose to his feet. A knot of men had gathered around something on the ground at a little distance, among them the uniformed figure of the mounted policeman.

A man came up to Avery and asked if he was hurt.

"I ain't, but a bullet hit my pack," returned Avery. "Yes, here's the hole. This here bag of flour stopped the bullet. What's the shootin' about?"

"Well, a feller said he thought the gun they found in old Mukluk Todd's hand belonged to Flash Dulin, so the mountie brung us out to look for him. Soon as we seen him he commenced shootin', and we had to let him have it. That's him over there."

"Is he dead?" asked Avery.

"Deader'n a mackerel. But how come he took a shot at you? What was him and you doin' anyway?"

Avery fumbled with his pack. "I don't know," he said over his shoulder. "It seems he wanted my pack. He pulled a gun and said to hand over quick. We was arguin' about it when you fellers come along. I tried to duck and he took a shot at me."

He straightened up and looked the man square in the face. "What I want to know who's goin' to pay me for this sack of flour what he ruint?"

Bunyan Land

Alaska is a land of big things! Its Larkspur plants grow ten feet in height. It has flowers, vegetables and fruits of greater size than in any part of the United States. The Kodiak bears are the largest bears in the world, and Timber Wolves approach the size of ponies. Mount McKinley is over 20,000 ft. from base to peak—the highest mountain in the world thus measured—and Mount Katmai, with an active volcano, has a volcanic crater so large that it has so far defied measuring.

HELL-TOWN

By HORACE BROWN

It was a wild town, and reckless, sprawling on the frozen rim of the Arctic wilderness . . . and fair play went by the boards in man's greedy, ruthless quest for power and wealth.

HERE WAS a growing community on the edge of the wilderness. Pop Winters' blue eyes sparkled as they took in the snow-laden mass of galvanized iron, tarpaper, and wood that went to make up the boom town of Redblade.

"Goshamighty, Hap!" he exclaimed. "If I hadn't seed it I wouldn't've believed it. It war'n't so long that was forest-coverin' for redskins. Now look at it! Won't be no time before it's head-of-steel."

The lanky young man standing beside him on the snowy hill gave the old-timer an affectionate poke in the ribs with his gloved hand.

"Now, it's head-of-nowhere, Pop," he drawled. He took off his glove, licked expertly at cigarette paper and tobacco until he had an almost-perfect cylinder, then replaced the fur-lined mitten.

"In your time it was the hoss and stagecoach. Now, it's railroad. What'll it be next?"

"Still hoss and stage-coach around here, an' not so much of stage-coach, neither."

"But growing. Five years ago . . . wilderness. Today . . . a wilderness town. Tomorrow? Why? Why come away up here to the edge of the Arctic Circle?"

"To make money," answered the older man.

"Why?" Happy Daize grinned. "Now, now, don't start on me. I know all your answers. But as long as I've a bed-roll and a can of beans and a frying-pan . . . well, I'm happy."

This was an old argument between the pair, and Pop Winters broke it off.

"It's a wonderful sight, Happy. It's man pushing on and on. We conquered the West and now we're after the North-West."

Happy surveyed the scene once more.

"I prefer the bush or cow-country."

"Sheep?" asked the old man slyly. Hap shuddered.

"We'd better be moving on. It's getting frosty." He shuffled a snowshoe experimentally, pulled his parka hood forward. "Tell me, Pop, what's this all about? I'm not one for askin' many questions, and I go where you go, but—"

Pop did not reply for a moment. He looked over the virgin land he loved, now in the grip of its first despoiling. The wind whispered out of the west, shaking the scrub-pines gently, and promising gales of snow in the not-too-distant future. The blanketing white softened the hard land and gave its rugged contours an excessive grace.

The lure was gold and the hope of gold. Placer mines were scooping it out of the rushing streams, washing the yellow stuff down sluices fashioned from wood and

"This old sourdough will never give up," yelled one of Fang's men. "Let's leave him."

sweat, leaving it gleaming wetly and richly on the screens. Lone prospectors worked in the pouring waters, washing out panfuls, looking for nuggets, some getting rich, others getting blisters. It was the age-old race for the precious metal that was supposed to bring a man good fortune. Men had become wealthy overnight. Wages were high, if you could get anyone to work for you, but so were prices.

The little entertainment Redblade provided was costly and often degrading. It was a man's world, in which women were rare; women came to Redblade for adventure or money or both.

It was truly the City of Gold, the Eldorado of which Raleigh had dreamed, perched on the rim of a freezing, austere world.

POP looked at Hap. As always, he liked what he saw. The old man squirted out some of his chaw. He hitched up his trousers, as though taking a mental hold of his resolution.

"Son, I never told you this, but I got a girl."

The younger man looked at the weatherbeaten prospector with undisguised admiration.

"No! Well, you old—"

"Hold on! Don't get me wrong. I mean I got a daughter."

This piece of information seemed as hard for Hap to digest as the other. His jaw unhinged. He had known the old man intimately, now, for almost ten years, and had had not a hint of this.

"Her mother died when she was born nineteen years ago," the old man hurried on. "I—I was married kinda late in life. Lady's been goin' to school in Montreal."

"Lady?"

"That's the name I give her. I always wanted her to be a lady." His voice sounded troubled. "Like her Maw. Don't know how her Maw ever came to hook up with an old coot like me. It was just one of them things, I guess. An' then . . . an' then . . . it seemed we'd hardly got to bein' happy, when it—it happened."

Happy Daize puffed slowly on his cigarette.

"I think I understand, Pop. You turned against the child because of her mother dying."

"That's right," replied Winters gratefully, glad of the bond that existed between them that made it possible to leave the hard things unsaid or said softly. "I shouldn't've, but a man does queer things at a time like that. When I discovered my mistake it was too late. By then I'd found out that an old prospector ain't exactly the person to bring up a young girl. So I let her aunt in Toronto keep her, and then later I sent her to this here finishin' school in Montreal."

"And you haven't seen her since?"

The old man shook his head.

"Only once, an' that from a distance. I went down to fetch her two years ago after we struck it a bit lucky that time over near White Lake, remember? I was goin' to bring her West for the holidays. But I saw her in some kind of a college exercise business, an' she was so lovely an' so cool-lookin', that I—"

Hap put his arm around the stooping shoulders.

"That you turned right around and came back thousands of miles without having done what you went for," he finished for him. "Well, what's the trouble, now?"

"I'm gettin' on, Hap. I got a feelin' . . . well, a man doesn't live forever. An' there's nobody to look after Lady. Her aunt writes me she's headstrong and willful, an'—"

"Hold it!" laughed Hap. "You're not proposin' matrimony for me, Pop. Sight unseen?"

Pop flushed angrily.

"You ain't good enough for Lady!" he bit out, and then was instantly sorry. "I mean, there ain't no man good enough for Lady. I'm sorry, Hap."

"That's okay."

"But I want you to sort of keep an eye out for her if anything happens to me."

"You're just like old shoe leather. You won't wear out."

"I wasn't thinkin' of wearin' out. I was thinkin' of other things."

"Such as what?"

The old man waved a skinny hand at Redblade.

"Down there, son, my life ain't worth a nickel. Not a nickel! You ask why I

brought you up here. Mebbe I shouldn't've. It was askin' too much even of a pardner. But now I'm glad I did. You're handy with a gun. Since you scrapped with them breeds of Riel's, you ain't afraid of nothin', an' I need you *bad!*"

Happy Daize was impressed with the old man's earnestness. But he tried to laugh it off.

"I'm only an ex-Injun fighter, Pop."

Pop paid no attention.

"Lady's comin', Hap. I had her letter yesterday. She'll be here tomorrow."

Hap was amazed.

"What would a girl like her want in this hole?"

"She says she wants to see me. *Me!*"

"Why not? You're her Pop. If she's anything like her old man, Redblade'll be a better place for havin' her."

"Redblade's hell, Hap! I know." The old man's faded blue eyes looked out over the town. "It'll settle, but right now it's hell. I've seed it all before, what a town's like before the Law comes. Oh, I know that these newfangled Mounties are around and about, but they can't do everythin', an' they have to wink. They know things'll change, too. But I guess every explosion carries debris with it. Never knew one that didn't. Right now, Redblade's no place for a good woman, 'specially one like Lady."

HAP ground his cigarette in the snow. The old man's morbidity troubled him.

"Go on with you, Pop! You talk like you were already dead."

"I'm askin' for death, son! Down there, down in that town, death is waitin' for me. His name is Fang."

"Fang?"

"You don't know Redblade, Hap, if you ain't heard of Fang. George Ritchie's his right name, but he's Fang to everybody. He's got two of the biggest molars you ever saw on a man. And ugly! Why, son, he could make a fortune at the circus if he wasn't so busy makin' a fortune other ways. Redblade is Fang Ritchie, Hap, and Fang Ritchie is Redblade."

"Sounds like quite a guy," Hap said. "But I still don't see where you fit into the picture."

"There's only one way to make money in Redblade, aside from gold. That's from the people who use it for headquarters. There's almost as much money in people as there is in the dust. That's what Fang found out. He and his gang run Redblade to suit themselves. They keep it wide open . . . gambling, women, liquor, some say even dope. And the only reason my hide ain't worth anythin' on the open market is that I'm the only man who can stop Fang's racket." Sweat glistened suddenly on the old man's forehead.

"Years ago, before I took up with you, me and Fang were pardners. I was a hellion, then, too, and didn't much care. He grubstaked me, an' I came up here, chasin' wild geese, you know. I staked all the claims out I was allowed in this territory in the names of both of us. I staked out this whole damn townsite, son!"

Hap's heavy-lidded eyes shot open.

"What are you givin' me?" he asked.

"It's the truth. What's more, I kept up the assessment work. Hap, me an' Fang Ritchie, we own Redblade together! Only I ain't never got a cent out of it. Fang diddled me out of my share. I signed over things to him I shouldn't. The one thing I didn't sign over was the mineral rights to the ground on which Redblade is built. Son, if I wished, I could sink a shaft right spang in the middle of Fang's biggest gamblin' hall."

"You know you wouldn't get away with it, Pop."

"Tell that to Fang. He thinks different. He's sent word he wants to see me tonight."

"You're not goin', of course."

Pop seemed to be turning over in his mind what to say.

"When you get to my age, son, and have done what I've done and seen what I've seen, livin' ain't so all-fired important no more. What *is* important is doin' what's right, if not for yourself, then for others. I got to see that Lady is took care of."

Taking the old man gently by the shoulders, Hap twisted Pop around until he was staring down at him.

"I won't let you do it, Pop. I don't know this Fang, but I know his stripe. They're all alike. They kill for what they want."

"I'm wearin' my shootin'-iron, son. I reckon a man what has fought Blackfeet and breeds ain't too afraid of a fellow like Fang. Fang's all on top, Hap. I got an idea you scratch below the surface an' what's there is iron pyrites, not gold. I aim to scratch that surface."

Hap let Pop go, knowing it was useless to say any more. He made, however, one last try.

"I'll go with you."

"No, son, please! This is my private fight. If anythin' happens to me, an' you feel like gettin' into it, well, that'll be your business. But first of all promise me you'll take care of Lady an' see that she gets what's her."

The tall young man looked out over the town. Then he straightened.

"I promise," he said.

II

THERE was a blare to Redblade that was as hot as the Arctic winter night was cold. Along the short main street, huge oil lamps gave a garish brightness and thickened the air with their choking smell. Within the rickety buildings, the noises of voice and music were deafening.

The biggest, noisiest, and most brightly-lit of all the buildings was Fang Ritchie's *New Eldorado*. Half of it was given over to gambling and a bar, while the other half was devoted to what passed for dancing.

The floor echoed and trembled as miners' hobnailed boots bore down heavily, missing dainty evening slippers by seeming magic. Here and there beefy bouncers watched for signs of trouble.

A huge, ugly man leaned over a balustrade on the long gallery and watched the scene below. A perpetual smirk on his dead-white, pox-pitted face showed off the unusually long, tobacco-yellowed teeth that gave him his nickname. He looked big and ungainly resting on his elbows, but when he straightened up, it could be seen that he moved like a panther, and had all that black animal's rippling strength. His wicked little eyes had an oddly-red gleam, and were sunk far back in his head. They bespoke other panther traits—cunning and ruthlessness and cruelty. His head was close-cropped, and his ears cauliflowered.

A girl came out of one of the rooms that led off the gallery. Her makeup was streaked with tears, but she had a real beauty of the dark, flashing type. Her figure was full and seemed poured into the rather shabby black silk evening gown, which was about all she was wearing. She made to pass Fang, but the man moved to block her way.

"Hullo, Rose," he said, his voice peculiarly soft and caressing. "I see you've decided to be sensible."

The girl's fingers curved into claws, but she only waited sullenly.

"Fix your makeup!" Fang ordered sharply. "You know the rules by this time. You can't go down amongst the customers looking like that."

"Mr. Ritchie. George . . . please! I came here to sing. You've kept me shut up in that room for two weeks trying to make me do what I don't want to do. Haven't you any pity?"

Fang laughed without mirth.

"Pity never gets any cash. I've told you before: five thousand will buy you a seat on the boat south. Either that, or you work down below."

"I—I haven't any money."

"You have friends. How about the man whose picture was in your suitcase?"

Rose flamed under the makeup. She had thought to slip downstairs, perhaps find some man, tell him her story and beg him to help her get away. Now, with this devil of a man standing before her she felt faint and sick. With a choking cry, she turned and began to stumble towards her room. A great hand caught her and whirled her around pulling her suffocatingly against a massive chest. Fang Ritchie's breath was overpowering.

"In this town," Fang barked at her, "everybody, *everybody*, you understand, answers to me. That goes for you, too. I'll give you one more night to make up your mind."

With an almost careless motion he sent her catapulting against the thin pine door of her room. The door crashed open and she slumped on the floor. Fang laughed, as though something had pleased him, and turned back to watch the throng.

Suddenly, Fang stiffened. He reached up and tugged at his left ear lobe. Two of the bouncers took an immediate interest in the grey old man who slouched through the door of the *New Eldorado*. They came quietly up, one on each side of Pop Winters.

"The boss wants to see you," said the bigger of the pair.

Pop affected not to notice the subtle urging of the gun held in his side. He kept his own gnarled hands stiff in front of him in the manner of the old-time gunfighter.

"That's fine," he answered briefly. "I wanted to see him, too."

The odd little procession climbed the stairs seemingly unnoticed. But a tall young man in polished Wellington boots suddenly threw his poker-hand into the pot.

"That beats me," said the young man, ignoring the fact that he had thrown away a perfectly good pat straight. "I'd like to cash in."

"Over at the bar," the houseman told him.

Happy Daize swept the chips negligently into his ten-gallon hat, but his eyes were following the old man and the two bouncers up the stairs.

"Be seein' you," he called over his shoulder, as he sauntered towards the bar. His movements were slow and deliberate when he dumped the chips on the imitation mahogany.

"Keep your hands on the bar," a voice whispered in his ear. "Have a drink on the house."

In the mirror, Happy caught the reflection of a small, pasty-faced man with cruel eyes. Something hard and round jabbed into his back.

"Can't do both," said Hap, the mirror also giving him a view, somewhat distorted by fly-specks, of Pop Winters reaching the landing, and being met by a man he knew instantly as Fang Ritchie.

"Drink up and look natural," snapped the pasty-faced youth. "One special, Bob."

As the drink slid towards him, Hap knew it was loaded. Within three minutes of his downing the mixture, he would lose all interest in what was going on.

"I only drink milk," he drawled, his hands tensed flat on the bar, his weight shifted to his insteps, his knees relaxed.

"Wise guy, eh!" The gun in his back bruised him. "Drink it and make it snappy!"

THE flat hands lifted Hap's deceptively lanky figure. A hard boot kicked back and out with devastating strength, all in the one motion. The timing was perfect; the gun spun from the youth's shattered hand as he screamed. Hap was over the bar in a leap. A stiff arm bowled over the barkeep, and Hap kicked him in the head as he went by. There was a sickening crunch, but Hap's eyes remained cold and level. Doubled over, he ran the length of the bar snap shooting the nearby lamps as he went. Almost before it was noticed anything was wrong, Hap had blacked-out his corner of the *New Eldorado*. The entertainers were in a screaming panic.

Knowing the bouncers would mark down the flashes and converge on that spot, he slipped through a door he had noted in the back of the bar. He reloaded as he ran. It reminded him of that night when he had galloped through the Indian encampment near Regina.

He had no idea where he was going or why. All he knew was that old Pop Winters, who had been good to him, was in trouble. Sooner or later, he would find himself so outnumbered that he would not have a chance; at the moment, the iniative of surprise lay with him.

Behind him, muffled by the door, he heard cries and panicky shots, and the smashing of furniture; ahead were the squeals of women and the curses of men.

Hap risked a match. The brief flare showed him the stairs. He started up two at a time. Halfway up he stiffened flat against the wall. Three men clattered by close enough for him to smell the stale liquor on their breaths. He waited until they reached the bottom, then darted the rest of the way.

Gun in hand, Hap raced along the gallery. It was empty, all but ghost-like in the enforced gloom. The sounds he had heard came from rooms off the gallery.

Hap judged it to be less than two minutes from the time he had first kicked the pasty-faced man. He knew he had seconds

before the hunt against him organized.

He loped along the corridor, listening at various doors. At the fifth try, he heard no sounds from the other side, and tried the handle. The door gave. He heard a half-sob, stifled by an exclamation, and was about to close the door again, when the lights blazed up all over the place. He dived through the door and snapped it shut behind him. A choked-off squeal of terror greeted him.

It was seconds before his eyes became accustomed to the light again. A pretty girl was sitting up in the bed staring at him with unbelieving eyes.

"Rose!" he said hoarsely. And then again, because he could think of nothing else, "Rose!"

"Oh, Happy!" The girl was out of the bed and across the room, with glad and yet frightened arms about him. "How—how did you know?"

Somewhat recovered, he held her away harshly.

"Know what?" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"You don't think—"

Rose seemed stunned by the unspoken accusation. Her eyes went helplessly to the picture on the dresser, a picture of the same young man who was now in her room, and then travelled slowly to the bars on the window. Happy followed her gaze and swore softly.

"So that's how it is!" he said. "So that's Fang Ritchie's racket! Now *I've* a score to settle with him. Listen, Rose, I haven't time to talk. I've got to get out of here. I don't think the two of us can get out together. But I'll be back for you. Has he harmed you in any way?"

The girl shook her head.

"He's given me until tomorrow night to make up my mind. I came here as a singer. That's what he advertised for. He wanted five thousand dollars, or I was to be one of his—his girls."

She began to sob again. Hap took her gently and kissed her.

"We'll get you out of this," he promised.

Voices were raised on the gallery, and fists began to pound on the doors.

"Turn out your lamp quick!" Hap commanded, diving under the bed. "Then get into your bed, and pretend to be asleep. It's curtains for us both if I'm found here."

The door to Rose's room flew open.

"Seen a man anywheres, Rose?" asked a tough voice.

"Get out of here!" she said indignantly. "You know what'll happen to any man Fang catches in my room before he gives the word."

"Which won't be long!" There was an evil tone in the voice. "See you later, Rose."

The door banged shut.

"That was a close call, Rose," he said, hauling himself out and dusting himself off. "And nice goin'. I was—"

He broke off. The girl was crying.

"Never mind, honey, I'll get him," he told her. "I'll get him if it's the last thing I ever do."

FANG RITCHIE looked at the elderly bantam with amused contempt.

"Well," he said, "it's been a long time. Welcome to our city."

"I'm glad you said 'our.'" Pop looked more and more like a game rooster baited by a bulldog. "I've come to claim what's mine."

Fang shouted:

"He wants what's *his*, boys!" His two thugs laughed with equal viciousness. "Shall we give him what's comin' to him?"

The old man stood firm.

"I'm not askin' any moren' a fair fight, Fang, Western style . . . you an' me alone on an empty street."

This brought fresh laughter. Fang's face hardened.

"Listen!" he bit out. "There's only one way to deal, an' that's from the bottom of the deck. You'd think you'd've learnt that lesson by now. When you step into a rattler's nest, you've got to expect to be bitten. Bite him, boys!"

Pop felt rough hands lifting him by the elbows and hurrying him down the deserted gallery. He opened his mouth to yell, but a fist slackened his jaw.

Fang's men were dragging the old man ungently down the stairs, when the lights went out. They cursed, but Pop was light and they lifted him and rushed him the remaining steps. If Happy had but known

it, he could have reached out his hands and touched him.

When Pop Winters came to, he was being carried along a snow-covered trail. One of the thugs stumbled and swore. The old man went against a snow-bank and cold wetness trickled down his back inside his clothes. He shivered with more than the cold.

"What'll we do with the old coot?" asked one man.

"Strip him down to his underwear and tie him to a scrub-tree," the other answered callously.

Pop Winters was an iron-nerved man. He had faced up to drink-crazed gunmen, to rampaging Indians, and won out. But the horrible suggestion was too much for him. He had seen a man once who had lost his way and been frozen to death. The sight had sickened him.

The old prospector struggled pitifully.

"No! no!" he pleaded. "No, kill me quick! Take my gun, anything! But kill me quick!"

His frantic pleas were the signal for laughter, and some crude jests about his coming ordeal.

The cold was already gnawing at his ancient bones. It bit and snapped with a ferocity he had not believed capable, although he had known frostbite before.

In a few minutes Pop Winters' clothing had been ripped from him, and he was tied to a tree. All the while, his captors taunted him, but he made no reply.

"Come on!" said one finally. "It's getting damned cold. Let's go. Happy dreams, old-timer."

A million fine needles of frost-laden air lanced him. Had there been a wind, he would not have survived minutes. But his old frame was tough, and it resisted the biting of the cold through his woolen underwear.

He knew he could not last long. His body felt momentarily on fire; blazing with the agony of numbness creeping up from his feet. He shivered and shook. His teeth clattered loudly. He fought against the impulse of useless screaming.

His brain was awhirl with crackling, snapping Northern Lights. He strove mightily to hold himself together. Then he felt the stealing peace that heralded unconsciousness. He gave up the struggle, and welcomed the blackness.

Snow began to fall gently around him.

III

HAPPY DAIZE waited until the last noise had died away in the *New Eldorado*. It was after three a. m. He had spent the time of waiting in whispered conversation with the singer known as Rose Shannon, and the more he heard the more he hated Fang Ritchie. He had sat twirling the cylinder of first one gun and then the other, and the bile that was in him he could taste.

"Is there any way out of here besides the front door?" he asked.

"The whole place is guarded," Rose whispered. "I tried to escape one night, and was caught. But I know that there is a fire-escape from Fang's room. I've heard the girls talk about it rather bitterly."

Hap stood up, bulking in the dim light from the window of the false dawn. He twisted his gun-belt so the Colts hung free.

"Which room?"

The girl reached up to him.

"Take me with you, Hap! Don't leave me here!"

He disengaged her clinging arms gently.

"I'll be lucky to get out of here alive myself." He reached into his backpocket and pulled out what looked like a toy pistol. "This's a snub .22. There's five shots in it. Don't use it unless you have to. I figger you're safe until tomorrow night, anyway. Now, do some talkin' in your sleep to cover any noise I make goin' out your door. Which room is Fang's?"

"The one at the west end of the corridor. He keeps it locked."

"That won't worry me none." He kissed the girl. "I'll be back, but if I'm not here by tomorrow night use that gun to get you out when they let you downstairs."

The tall man eased himself from the room, the creaking of the pine door covered by the sounds Rose Shannon made. He felt his way along the corridor.

Hap inspected the lock on the door at the end of the corridor. Then he brought out a thin piece of celluloid and a gadget that looked something like a cross between a can-opener and a pair of pliers.

He slipped the celluloid in between the door jamb and the lock, twisted it here and there, was rewarded by a click. Then he turned the handle gently. The door did not give. It was bolted from the inside.

Praying the bolt was well-oiled, Hap inserted the gadget and began to work it gently. The bolt came back without a creak, and the door swung open. Loud snores made him bolder. He ghosted into the room, and took the precaution of bolting the door.

As he took a step across the bare floor, a board creaked shrilly. Hap stopped, hardly breathing. There was a break in the snoring; then it stopped altogether. Hap knew that Fang was awake and listening. The bedspring squeaked, and a gun-hammer clicked.

"Tom!" called Fang.

Hap struck straight at the voice, caught Fang a blow between the eyes. Blinded, half-stunned, the huge man fired wildly. Hap was on him, twisting the bedclothes around the giant.

Heavy fingers closed on Hap's throat, but he twisted and bit desperately at the enemy arm. Fang howled with rage and released his grip, and was soon bound by his own bedclothes. Fang opened his mouth to roar for help, but Hap stuffed a pair of socks into the opening.

"Where's Pop?" Hap demanded, pulling out the gag.

Fang cursed. Hap calmly reached down and pressed his thumbs into the man's eyeballs.

"Let's see how tough you are," Hap said between set teeth.

"You'll— you'll wish you were dead before I'm through with you!"

Hap increased the pressure. Fang screamed.

"You'll blind me, you fool!"

"Talk fast before your eyes pop out."

"Over to the woods," Fang gasped.

"Which way?"

"Straight— straight northwest from here."

THERE was a banging at the door, and loud voices demanding what was wrong. Hap stuffed the gag back hurriedly.

"It's okay." He had not heard much of Fang's voice, but he thought the imitation would get by, muffled as it would be by the thick door. "I had a nightmare. Woke up an' shot at nothin'. Go back to bed!"

There was a mumble of voices.

"You sure you're okay, Fang?"

Fang reassured them and they went away. Hap slipped through the window. The rickety fire escape protested beneath his weight.

"Who's there?" called a voice.

Hap saw the blur at the foot of the ladder and jumped. He landed with his legs in a deadly scissors about the guard's throat. There was a desperate, threshing struggle, which Hap ended by balling his two fists and bringing them down hammer fashion upon his victim's neck, following up with a vicious swipe behind the ear with the edge of his hand. The man collapsed and lay still.

The compass gave him north-west. He coursed the ground in that direction like a hunting-dog, seeking sign in the growing dawn. It was not hard to spot the path made through the snow by Fang's party.

The ground sloped down and became treacherous with new snow, over which the tall man went as easily as though it were solid earth. The Arctic day was coming swiftly, now. It had stopped snowing.

When he found Pop Winters, he was so angry he cried. With man-tears running down his face, he released his elderly partner from his torment, wrapped him gently in his parka. The old man was scarcely recognizable, his face blue, his limbs rigid.

Throwing Pop Winters over his back, Happy set out at a ground-eating run for Redblade.

Within a half-hour, old Pop was in a clean, white bed in Doctor Simms' house.

"He'll be all right, I think," Doc said to Hap. "These old-timers have a wonderful vitality. But another few minutes would have been too late, even for him. As long as he doesn't develop pneumonia, I can counteract the freezing. This is some of Fang Ritchie's work, I suppose?"

"Yeah." Hap's voice was ice. "You've seen it before, I guess?"

"Too many times."

"Will Pop be safe here?"

The little doctor stiffened.

"I don't think even Fang would dare come in here. But I'm going to make certain this thing is to stop. I've put up with enough. Ike Boylen is the telegrapher. I'll have him wire the nearest Mountie post, and tell them to get a troop up here in a hurry. This nonsense has to stop."

Hap considered.

"Okay, as far as it goes, doctor. But that'll take several days. I've got to have action sooner. Surely I can get help somewhere in this town."

The doctor nodded.

"I'd help myself, young man, but I can't leave my patient. Fang Ritchie has Redblade terrorized, but the majority of the people here are decent and law-abiding. All they ask is a chance to earn an honest living, and perhaps get the odd windfall. They're opening up new territory and a new world. They—"

"I know all that!" Hap cut in impatiently. "What I want to know is: have any of 'em guts?"

The doctor's eyes flamed.

"You crossing Fang?"

"I aim to try. Pop here is one reason. I have another."

"I like your style! Very well, there's one man who can help you. That's Jonathan Craik, the editor of the *Redblade Herald*. He's been carrying on a losing battle against Ritchie's corruption for some time. Fang has him all but licked. He'll know who will stand behind you."

"With guns?"

A smile broke over the doctor's face.

"With guns," he answered joyously. "Fifth house down the street."

TAKING a last, reassuring look at Pop, who, though still unconscious and wrapped like a mummy in bandages, was breathing steadily, Happy left the hospital and strode off down the street to the *Herald* office.

Hap's loud knocking brought irascible mutterings from within, and finally a shock of gray hair poked around a slightly opened door. It was followed by a singularly wrinkled and sleepy face.

"Go away!" said the face. "Go far away! Can a decent citizen not even enjoy slumber in this abandoned outpost of sin?"

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Craik," Hap explained patiently.

"Well, I don't want to talk to you," rudely replied the editor, and went to close the door.

Hap shoved in a foot.

"I said I wanted to talk," he told the eye that was left of the head, and his voice was not quite so patient. "I want to talk about Fang Ritchie."

"No, thanks. I've had my nightmares already. If you don't take that foot out of my door I'll have my dog chew it. He likes leather."

Hap threw back his head and laughed, the first laugh in many hours. The eye blinked at him in puzzlement.

"I want to talk to you," Hap said, "of the best ways and means of making Redblade a better place . . . say, a place without Fang Ritchie."

The door practically flew open, revealing a skinny man in a long nightgown. He had a strong, determined chin and a glint of humor in his eyes.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? Come in, come in. You'll have to excuse my formal evening attire, but I so seldom welcome guests. The citizens of Redblade have learned it is good policy to leave me strictly alone. What's your name and state your business? Bacon and eggs? Coffee? All out of cans."

Talk and action seemed to be synonymous with Jonathan Craik. He waited for no reply, but began to stir up the stove and to put on fresh wood.

"Well, come on, come on, speak up," he said, after Hap had opened his mouth for the fifth time in an attempt to say something. "I like a man to say what's on his mind."

Hap grinned.

"Then you just fry eggs and bacon, old-timer," he told the editor, "and listen for a change."

He told Craik the whole story. He told him of Pop and of Rose Shannon, and of his early morning encounter with Fang. This last brought cries of "Good! good!" from the eritor, but these exclamations of satisfaction turned to growls of anger as

Hap told of finding Pop Winters almost-dead.

"The doctor," Hap concluded, "told me you'd know what people in this town weren't too scared of a bully to help me wipe the floor with him."

With a wolfish smile, Jonathan Craik said, "Young man, I like you! You're the first person with spunk to come to Redblade in a dog's age. I'm glad you came when you did. I'll tell you, but I'll tell nobody else, that I was ready to quit. I was down to my last meal, thanks to Fang, curse his yellow teeth! People are afraid to read the *Herald,* let alone advertise in it. It was all set to accept Fang's offer of the fare south. I'm a little old for gunplay. But you give me an hour and I'll spread your story, and I imagine there'll be quite a few gents who'll oil up their six-shooters for your party."

Hap thought of something.

"When does the next stage sled get in?"

Craik consulted the battered alarm-clock on the shelf.

"Nine-thirty."

It was then seven-fifteen.

"Pop Winters' daughter'll be on that stage. She'll be expectin' her old man to meet her. I'd better be there."

"And get plasted to hellangone?" demanded the editor indignantly. "No, my friend. It is I who will stick my neck out. Donning my best bib and tucker, I shall hie me to the stop-off to meet the fair damsel. In the meantime, you will, as the saying goes, lie high."

"You mean 'lie low'."

Jonathan produced a half-filled amber bottle.

"Suit yourself, friend Happy," he said, "but if I were you, I would prefer to lie high."

Hap shook his head. He needed all his faculties for whatever was coming.

"Go ahead and don't mind me," he said.

Jonathan put the bottle away regretfully.

"No, you're right, the job will require clear heads and sound thinking, or we will have no heads and need no thinking."

They sat down to what was to have been Craik's last meal in Redblade. Happy tucked in, realizing for the first time how great was his hunger.

"May not get another meal for quite a spell," he sighed contentedly, rolling his cigarette one-handed while Craik watched in fascination. "May never get another meal."

They ate in silence. Finally, Hap pushed his plate away with a sigh of satisfaction.

"How many men can we count on?" he asked.

"About fifteen; a dozen, anyway. "Craik shoved his fork belligerently near Hap's eye. "I know what you're thinking, young fellow. You're thinking this is one hell of a town to get itself into a state like this. Well, the world didn't do so well with Napoleon. Think that over for a while. Redblade started off with the best of intentions. But men get lonely, and they need excitement, or what passed for it. Fang supplied the wine, women, and song. He owned the real estate rights to ninety per cent of the place."

"I know. Pop Winters was the partner he tricked out of a half-share. Pop would never have allowed this place to get like this. Pop loves this country."

"And so do I. And so do you." The fork waved perilously again. "When I say there are a dozen men here who'll fight for you, I mean that there's hundreds. But they need leadership. The dozen are the kind who lead. You start a winning fight, son, and you'll have this whole damn town behind you. The Fang Ritchies of this world are easy to beat when you stick together."

Hap grinned, "You make it sound easy." He got out of the chair and stretched. "You go round up your leading citizens. I'll catch some shuteye. I'm goin' to need it."

Within a minute and a half he was sound asleep on the editor's dishevelled bunk. Craik looked at him affectionately.

IV

LIKE A CAGED animal, Fang Ritchie raged up and down his office. The sheepish members of his gang took good care to keep out of his path.

"You let one man . . . *one man* . . . walk all over you!" Fang stormed. "A fine bunch of hands you turned out to be! Tom, I ought to whale you alive."

Tom gulped but said nothing. His neck still felt as though someone had broken it.

"He hid somewhere in the *New Eldorado,* somewhere upstairs," Fang went on. "Where? You searched every place. He had help from somebody. Who?"

The red-yellow eyes swept each man in the room.

"Get this! This Pop Winters has to be found. As long as he's on the loose, he's dynamite. He owns the mineral rights to all of Redblade. Maybe he could even prove fraud on the real estate transactions with a smart-enough lawyer. There's a lot of people here just aching for the chance to kick us if we get down."

"Listen, boss——" cut in one of the thugs who had taken Pop Winters to the tree the night before. He stopped short as Fang whirled on him.

"You fool! You clumsy, stupid fool!" Fang bellowed. "If you'd done what I told you, you and Butch, we wouldn't be in this mess, now."

He fetched the unfortunate gunman smack across the cheek.

"Anybody else want to say something?" he demanded.

Butch spoke swiftly.

"Jim's tryin' to tell yuh we got an idea, boss," he said.

Fang had Jim by the lapels. He lifted him off the floor until Butch was on a level with his eyes.

"Spill it!" he barked. "And make it good."

"We searched the old guy," Butch gasped. "There was a letter."

Fang flung the man against the wall as though he were an empty sack. Jim collapsed with a moan.

"Where's the letter?" Fang's voice was hoarse with his anger. "Where is it?"

A crumpled and dirty envelope was snatched from Butch's hand. Fang grabbed the letter. As he read, his features gradually relaxed, and he chuckled.

"Well, well," he said at last, "so old Pop was holdin' out on us, eh? So he had a daughter, did he? An' she's arrivin' this mornin', is she? Well now, isn't that just nice? Boys, let's you and me form a bit of a reception committee. Maybe we better take a lady along for company an' for the looks of the thing. Let's have a little talk with Rose."

Rose Shannon shook her pretty head vigorously.

"I won't be a party to any such thing," she said decisively.

"Maybe there's other things you'd rather do." Fang glanced around the circle of evil faces, all with avid eyes on the girl. "Maybe you'd rather entertain Harry here." He indicated the gunman who had taunted Rose the night before. "He has some fancy ideas."

The girl shuddered. Her shoulders sagged.

"What do you want me to do?" she whispered.

"I want you to meet this girl like I said. Tell her her father is not feelin' well, but that he's sent a cutter for her." Fang exposed his horse-teeth in a grin. "She won't know I have the only cutter in Redblade, there bein' no roads to go anywhere except south. Lead her over to the cutter, and we'll do the rest." The grin left his face. "Don't try any funny business, though. We'll have guns on you all the way."

They went out, slamming the door, but not before Rose had come to a decision. She began to rummage in the drawers of the dresser. At the bottom of the second drawer she found a piece of paper. Taking out her lipstick, she wrote a note then folded a ten-dollar bill into the note along with the lipstick case to weight it. The whole made a little parcel she could shove through the bars on her window.

It seemed that she waited an eternity at the window, but it was in a reality about twenty minutes. Her watch showed it was eight twenty-five, when she heard at long last the cheery whistle of the urchin with whom she had struck up a vicarious acquaintance. He passed underneath her window every morning about the same time on his way to school, and, for want of something better to do, she had talked to him at times. While she could not see him, she knew he was twelve years old and that his name was "Red."

"Red," she whispered when he passed nearby.

"Hi! What you want?"

"Red, I need your help . . . badly. And there's ten dollars in it for you. Is there

anyone around?" Red assured her there was not. "I want you to find a tall young man named Happy Daize, and give him the note I'm going to throw down to you. The money is inside."

"Shucks!" came Red's youthful voice. "I'd do it for you, ma'am, for nothin'."

"Thanks, dear," she said. "Tell me, who can you trust in this town?"

"Well, there's my Pop," said Red. "He keeps the general store, an' he don't like Mr. Ritchie much. An' then there's Mr. Craik, the old guy what runs the paper an' gets in everybody's hair because he don't like Mr. Ritchie neither."

"Your father probably would think it's some trick you're trying to play on him. Go to this Mr. Craik. Give him the note I'm throwing down. Watch for it, now!"

She eased the little package through the bars and tossed it outwards.

"Got it!" whispered Red. "Gee, I gotta go! Here comes somebody."

EDITOR JONATHAN CRAIK'S little shack seemed to bulge. Men had slipped in one by one, acknowledging introductions to Happy with suspicious grunts, until there was no room left to sit or stand. Tobacco smoke circled chokingly about the two rooms. But nobody suggested opening a door or window. Every time the door opened to admit someone new rifles and six guns were cocked.

When there were fourteen men, counting Happy and Jonathan, the latter outlined his reasons for calling the men together, and ended with, "We have to take a stand some time. It might as well be now. If we win, Redblade becomes a decent place where we can bring up our children. If we lose—well, what have we got to lose once we've lost our self-respect? I'm going to ask Happy to tell us what happened to his partner and himself and what he proposes to do about it."

Happy told them, told them in sharp, emphatic syllables. The men had begun to listen to him with their eyes on the ground, but he had not been speaking long before he had their entire attention.

"I don't care whether you're in this with me or not," he wound up. "I have some things I aim to settle an' I'm goin' to settle 'em. I'm alone. Most of you, I understand, have families. When I start a fight, I finish it, or it finishes me. This could be the one to finish me. It's no fight for a family man . . . unless he wants his family to have a good place in which to live. That's all."

Murmurs of approval ran around the crowded room. Happy flushed and swallowed.

"Thanks, fellows," he said simply. "Next thing's . . . how?"

Everyone had a plan. Jonathan Craik tore them all apart quickly. It was obvious he had given the matter a lot of thought.

"The *New Eldorado* is practically a fortress," he told them. "And we're badly outnumbered. We can't burn the place down. There's the women to consider, especially this Miss Shannon, who's an innocent bystander, so to speak. We'll have to get more men, and that takes time."

"How about Doc's plan of getting the Mounties?" a man demanded.

"It's all right as far as it goes. But we've tried that before. Where's your evidence? You know what happens in Redblade the moment a Mountie comes in. Fang has an efficient spy system. No, this has got to be a people's movement, and thank God we found the man to lead it in Happy Daize!"

There was subdued applause. The townsfolk were used to their editor's verbal pyrotechnics, but Happy's quiet conviction had stirred them. If only there was a way, a way that would avoid a lot of unnecessary blood-letting . . .

A bold knock on the door, brought every man to his feet.

"Take it easy," whispered Craik. "Let me handle this."

Breaths were held, as he eased the door open gently, then guffaws broke out as he flung it wide.

"Come in, son," Jonathan invited the red-haired twelve-year-old who stood there. "I think your dad's here."

"Why aren't you in school, Mike?" his father roared.

"Please, sir, I was asked to give this to Mr. Craik, or to Mr. Happy Daize. It's from a lady in Fang Ritchie's place."

The titter that ran around the room was

but he promptly handed it over to Happy, made a simultaneous dive for the package the boy was holding. The editor won out, but he romptly handed it over to Happy, then read the lipsticked message over Happy's shoulder. The young man let out a whoop.

"Listen to this!" he exulted. "It's from Rose Shannon. She says Fang an' his gang are plannin' to kidnap Pop Winters' daughter when she arrives, usin' Rose as bait. See what it means? Fang's men will be divided. We can round up Fang and those who are waitin' for the stage. We can use them as hostages."

"By Godfrey, son!" said Craik. "Redblade will have to erect a statue in your memory!"

"Hold on! I'm not dead, yet. Look, let's divide into four parties of three, with two men to go and watch the *New Eldorado*. Then close in on Ritchie's cutter from all sides. He won't be expectin' us. It should be a cinch. Everyone agreed?"

Fourteen throats said "Aye!" heartily. Now, with a definite plan of action and a real leader, the solid citizens of Redblade were prepared for pitched battle if necessary with the men who had ruled them for five long years through fear.

V

REDBLADE had only one connection with the outside world, apart from the newly-installed telegraph, and that was the stage, which ran from head-of-steel a hundred miles away. In Summer, the stage lumbered over the backbreaking corduroy road. In Winter, it went a little more gently by runners over a smooth-packed snow-trail. But if the weather changed suddenly in any season, the stage would fail to show up, and Redblade was cut off from its one link with civilization, for the citizens to some extent still distrusted the newfangled telegraph. Dog-teams made the trip regularly in Winter, but they could not carry the loads.

The weather had been unusually fine, with only occasional snowflurries, and the 9:30 stage was only fifteen minutes late, an event in itself. It slid to a stop on screeching runners, its frost-covered horses breathing heavily, and its driver climbing down stiffly from his exposed perch. Someone handed him a bottle of whiskey, and he consumed half of it in a grateful gulp, with scarcely a cough or a splutter.

The stage had its usual quota of passengers . . . mining men, prospectors and greedy greenhorns. The sole exception was the last person to leave the stage. She looked as out-of-place as a queen at a barn-dance. She seemed unconscious of the attention she was getting, but looked around enquiringly, as though not quite certain of what she would find.

Watching, Fang Ritchie's eye dilated. He considered himself a connoisseur of women, but "Lady" Winters was something new in even his variegated experience. From the top of her cloche hat nestled on her red-gold hair to the tip of her ponyskin boots, she was what Fang termed "class." Perhaps this idea of his would prove more interesting that he had imagined.

As Lady Winters looked around, Rose Shannon stepped up to her. Rose was trembling, but kept her voice steady with an effort. She had no idea of whether her note had been delivered, or what could be done if it had been. To lure this lovely girl into the clutches of Fang seemed something beyond all her thinking, but she had no alternative. Fang's men were all about her. If she made one false gesture, said one thing other than what she had been told to say, she knew what to expect. She shivered.

"Miss Winters?" she asked, keeping her eyes down.

The girl nodded.

"Your father asked me to meet you," Rose lied, hating herself. "He's ill. Nothing serious, you understand, but enough to keep him in bed. Some friends of mine brought their sleigh to meet you."

"That was kind of them." Lady's voice was soft. "My luggage?"

"I'll see it's picked up later."

"I'm looking forward to meeting my father." They were walking slowly towards the cutter, many eyes following them, some appreciatively, some apprehensively. "It may sound strange to you, but I haven't seen him since I was a child.

I'm sorry he couldn't meet me, but glad it is nothing serious. We'll have a great deal to talk over together, he and I."

Rose knew that if she had to act out many more steps of this lie, if she had to listen to much more of this trusting innocence, she would go to pieces.

Lady slowed, when she saw Fang Ritchie. He caught her look, and his quick temper flared. He motioned, and Tom stepped up behind the girls.

"Into the cutter, quick!" Tom said, shoving them.

It was the last thing he ever did. A shot by Happy caught him square in the forehead. As the thug pitched forward, men boiled in from every side. Fang's gangsters did not have a chance.

But Fang acted fast. He reached out a hairy hand, and grabbed them unceremoniously into the sled. With almost the same motion, he whipped the spirited team into a gallop. A volley of shots churned the dust around the speeding vehicle.

"Don't shoot!" yelled Happy. "Don't shoot! You'll hit the women!"

Fang chuckled and swung the cutter onto the main street of Redblade. Fang looked quickly into the back-seat. The two women were struggling to untangle themselves, but the swaying of the rapidly-travelling sled made this impossible.

He skidded the sled to a stop in front of the *New Eldorado*. Men came running.

"Get these women inside, quick" he ordered. "Then put up all the shutters, and get ready for trouble. We're going to show Redblade a little bit of hell!"

HAPPY expertly bandaged a flesh-wound on Jonathan Craik's left arm. The editor was the only casualty, apart from Tom, who was beyond all help. The men of Redblade, long tormented, were yelling and cheering their surprise victory, while Fang's gangsters stood sullen and subdued.

"We did it!" Craik exulted. "We did it, Happy;"

"Did what? Captured a few punks. But the big fish got away, and he's taken the bait with him."

The newsman sobered.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, *I* have! Fang will be boiling mad. I've never seen a man who could get so angry without going completely insane. He'll be back here with the rest of his gang."

"Then we'll be ready for him!"

"How? He'll have a half hundred to our handful. He has what amounts to a fortress. On top of it all, even if we should beat him, he's got the women. Jonathan, more an' more this's gettin' to be a one-man job. If anythin' happens to me, well, that don't matter so much, but if anythin' happens to Jack Arnold here, what's goin' to become of that swell kid of his?"

Jack Arnold was the father of the red-headed boy. He had been industriously tying up one of Fang's thugs, while listening.

"We're in it, mister," he said, "and we're stuck with it. If we lose out on this fight, we might just as well pack up and leave Redblade, if we've still got skins on us, that is."

The men of Redblade grunted agreement. The swift victory had given them the confidence they needed to back up the courage they had always had, the courage of men who dare new frontiers. Now, with their prisoners, they closed in a circle about their leader. But something strange was happening. The circle grew unexpectedly big. Men were coming from every direction, as the news spread through Redblade like a prairie fire, and women, too, coming with hunting-rifles and revolvers and clubs, coming to inhale the first fragrance of freedom abroad in the town in years.

Fang's men had been jaunty and insulting at first, but as the crowd continued to press in until it numbered several hundred excited citizens, the thugs became quiet and their faces grew uncertain and haunted. More and more their narrowed eyes turned to the tall young man who was the center of all this, who had so upset the balance of things that their lives were no longer their own. In the mob about them they saw many angry faces belonging to men and women who had suffered at their hands. They paled as shouts of "Lynch 'em!" and "String 'em up!" began to swell in volume. They

showed relief, as Happy shut off the shouts with an upraised hand.

"Friends," he said, "I know just how you feel. These skunks deserve a necktie party. But what will it get you? They're only hired men, and there are a lot more where they came from. You kill them, and you put yourselves on their level."

"We wouldn't want to do that!" shouted a man from the rear of the crowd, and the laughter that followed eased the tension.

"That's right," agreed Hap, "you wouldn't. Why? Because you're good people, you're home-makers, and town-makers and country-makers." The crowd roared approval. "No, friends, the thing to do is to deliver these men over to the Law. Let the Law handle 'em."

"There isn't any Law here, mister," said a motherly-looking woman nursing a rifle. "There's only the law of Fang Ritchie and the law of this." She patted the gun-stock. "My Maw killed Indians and fought off outlaws in Saskatchewan before the Riel Rebellion. What she could do, her daughter can, too."

Hap's eyes shone.

"Then we'll bring the Law here! Yes, Mother. Here to Redblade! Let's teach Fang he can't run things to suit himself any more! Let's show him he's through!" This time the roar could be heard at the *New Eldorado*. "There's only one thing. There are innocent women involved in this, and women Fang has been using. Fang'll hide behind 'em. I know what Fang boasts. He says there isn't a man in Redblade can lick him, no holds barred, an' with knives. That's not my idea of fun, friends, but I'm willin' to try."

There was no cheering. Men looked at each other and at their women, and the light died out of their eyes.

"That's fine of you, boy," Jonathan Craik said huskily, "but you wouldn't have a chance, and we need you here to lead us. Everyone is with you now, but if you drop out, well, we'll never make the top. There must be another way."

"I can take care of myself."

"But not against Fang. He's a devil with the knife."

"That's just too bad for me. But Redblade will go on. Don't you see? The Mounties can really step in now. Fang's gone as far as kidnapping in open daylight. There'll be dozen of honest citizens to swear to it."

"There won't be one, son, not one, if we lose this round. When the Mounties get here there'll be the same closed mouths as always. A man may not fear for himself, but he's seen what's happened to women and children of other men who bucked Fang."

HAP took a hitch at his belt. His look was thoughtful.

"I don't see what else we can do," he said helplessly. "He's got the women. All I want is a fair fight with Fang Ritchie. Let him name the weapons. I want it out on the main street of Redblade, and I want you all to stand by to see there is no interference." An uncertain cheer went up. Hap's face broke into a boyish smile. "Cheer up, I'm not dead yet!"

The laughter had barely cleared the air when a man shouted to be let through. He was covered with snow, and panting.

"Fang Ritchie's on the loose!" he gasped to Hap. "He's threatening to burn the whole town. He's gathered all the toughs in the place, and he's headin' this way."

"I want all men who've any Indian fightin' experience up here on the double!" Hap shouted.

Over a score of men surged through the crowd. Hap looked them over briefly.

"You know the people here," he said. "Pick out platoons, quick, and scatter 'em. Keep a dozen paces between each, an' work it out in depth back down the street. Make everybody take cover. Put the women in the stage buildin'. I know they won't want to stay out of the fight, so tell 'em they're snipers. They'll probably be some help at that."

The men went about their tasks with efficiency. In a very few minutes, from a scene of complete disorder, the station was transformed into a battle-ground. The hardest argument had been that of convincing the women they should be in the shelter of the building. Some of the women had flatly refused to be placed anywhere but in the first or second line

of fire, and that was where they had stoutly remained.

Fang's men came boiling out of the main street, fanning out as they reached their objective, looking about uncertainly as they saw the preparations that had been made to greet them.

Hap stood up. He knew he was a perfect target but he felt he had to take the risk.

"Fang Ritchie!" Hap called. "Will you parley? Will you honor a flag of truce?"

Fang could not afford to be outdone by this stranger before his men. He placed himself in an equally-exposed position.

"State your case!" he shouted back. "If one of my men shoots you, I guess one of your men couldn't miss me."

It was beautiful bravado. Neither Fang nor Hap knew what nervous trigger-finger might put a period to their life sentence.

"Here's my case," Hap answered. "I think you're a yellow-livered coward, hiding behind the guns of your men. I don't think you have the guts to stand up to me in a fair fight. But I'll meet you on the main street of Redblade in fifteen minutes, if you'll agree to meet me alone and settle this man-to-man. I'll let you choose your weapons."

There was a moment of stunned silence. Hap could see the redness gather in Fang's neck and run all over his face.

"I'm afraid of no man living!" Fang roared back. "I'm least afraid of you, mister! I'll make a fair trade with you: we'll have it out man-to-man, no holds barred, no quarter asked. I'll choose knives. Or maybe you don't like cold steel, huh?"

"I eat it for breakfast," was the colm reply. "You name three for seconds, and I'll do the same. What's your trade?"

"Loser to leave Redblade within twenty-four hours . . . if he can."

"I'll go along with that."

Hap called to Fang, "Stripped to the waist?"

Fang hesitated. The thermometer was nudging zero. Then he shrugged and said:

"Suits me. I'll name Butch and Jim and Horse-face to act for me."

"I'll take Craik, and Jack Arnold here, and Don Burns. You three go out and talk to the others, and watch out for tricks."

Hap watched the threesome move slowly into the open, while three of Fang's thugs did the same from the opposite side. His eyes were unhappy. He wanted to live as much as any man . . . Brushing the thought aside, he signalled in his "captains." They came on the double.

"This is the play," he said tersely. "I'm goin' out there to win. It may be I won't; it may be I will. I'll do my best, anyway. Whatever happens, look out for fireworks. Win, lose, or draw. I don't trust Fang Ritchie. He'll try to pull somethin'. Here's what I want you to do: detail about a third of your men to sneak off while the fight's on and surround the *New Eldorado*. Cut off the retreat for Fang's men. If I win, they're goin' to be pretty upset and leaderless. If I lose, it'll make 'em overconfident."

"They'll have guards around the place," objected one of the men.

"Sure. But probably not enough. If you can surprise them, so much the better. They're goin' to be interested in the fight. They're goin' to want to see what's goin' on in the street. I'll work the fight far enough away from the *New Eldorado* that they'll have to come out a piece. That'll be your chance. Knock 'em off as quietly as you can. Then try to get into the place without involvin' the women. You'll have to use your heads. Okay?"

The men merely nodded. The plan had its flaws, but it was worth the chance to be incurred.

"The remainin' two-thirds," Hap went on, "will act as referees to see there's fair play. I haven't the slightest doubt but what Fang is cookin' up somethin' right now. Be ready for him. If you see any of his men tryin' to slip away, follow them. They may try to burn the town, or somethin' like that. Then the people would scatter to save their homes an' where would we be? It means every man has to be on his toes, an' every man has to be thinkin' straight. Any questions?" They shook their heads. "Okay, so long an' good luck. We'll get together when this is all over."

There was a silent handshake all around, and a silent prayer that Hap's

words would come true.

Main street was clearing. The opposing forces were taking refuge in buildings and stores along the thoroughfare. Hap's three seconds came back to him wearing sombre faces. Hap laughed.

"This isn't *your* funeral, boys," he rallied them.

"I just hope it isn't yours," said Arnold, helping Hap off with his shirt. Then the three men stared at the muscle-corded back and the long, steel-strong arms. Hap took in his belt a notch.

"Rub me down with snow," he said. "It'll make me used to the cold quicker."

From his hip, he took the ugly dagger and tested the edge. His seconds looked at the weapon and at each other. Their sombreness was being replaced rapidly by a mingled confidence and respect. Surely, here for the first time was a worthy opponent for Fang Ritchie!

Hap sheathed the dagger with a satisfied half-smile.

"Let's go!" he said, and struck off in the lead.

Jonathan Craik walked along with his fingers crossed.

VI

IF THERE was one thing that had surprised Rose Shannon, it had been the calmness with which Lady Winters had taken her predicament. Although Rose did not know too much of what had gone on, she sketched in what she knew for the girl, after they had been locked together in the same room.

"And I'm to believe you, am I?" asked Lady quietly. "How do I know this is not another of your tricks?"

Rose nodded, feeling miserable.

"I know just the way you feel, dear, but I only hope that my——that Happy Daize will figure some way out of this for us."

"I'm more worried about my father than anything. Who is this Happy Daize? What a peculiar name!"

"He's my——"

A key clacked in the lock. Harry came in. His eyes never seemed to leave Rose. It made her flesh crawl.

"Fang wants you to have a grandstand seat for the big fight," he told them. "He figgers it'll be educational." The gunman leered. "Should be nice watchin' your boy-friend sliced up with a knife."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lady said.

"Oh, so you don't know what I'm talkin' about. Maybe Rose here can wise you up. Eh, Rose? Come on. Get your parkas on. I ain't got all day. Fang says he wants to get it over with to get back an' entertain his newest guest."

Lady went white. Harry continued to look at Rose.

"Maybe I'll do some entertainin' of my own," he said. "Put your hands behind your backs."

He tied the girls wrists together over their fur-lined mittens, and led them out on a small, screened balcony that overlooked the main street.

"You'll have to stand, ladies," he said with mock gallantry, "but don't let it worry you. It won't last long. The boss is the best knife-man in the Territories. And don't try to leave or get any other ideas. You'll be watched."

"Only Fang could think of something like this," Rose said bitterly, when the gunman had gone. "I—I don't think I'll be able to look."

But she knew she would. There was a snakelike fascination to the street below. It was deserted, yet it seemed alive with deadly promise. Hundreds of eyes watched its white length from doorways and windows. It was elemental; it was the battle that strong men have staged since the Stone Age.

Fang glided out of the doorway of the *New Eldorado* and into their view. Bare to the waist, and wearing fringed Indian trousers and moccasins, he looked like an Iroquois on the warpath. As he moved, he flecked his muscles along his arms and back and they rippled and shone in the cold morning sun. In his right hand was an ugly-looking clasp-knife. Fang pressed a button. There was an audible click, and the blade flew out. With savage mockery, he turned to where he knew the women were standing in the balcony and bowed. His knife was an arc of light, as he swept his arm across his sweating, hairy chest.

"Until later!" he called out.

Although she knew herself hidden, Lady took a step back, her hand at her throat. She moaned.

"If he ever—" she began, and stopped, shuddering.

Rose had been busy.

"Keep an eye out for anyone coming," she whispered. "I think I'm working this knot loose. I have a gun Hap gave me. I strapped it to my leg. Just keep your nerve, sister!" She saw the look Lady was giving her. "I know you don't trust me, but you haven't any choice. You either believe me or you get *him!*"

The singer gestured down into the street. It was enough.

"Tell me what to do," said Lady.

HAPPY'S long legs were loose, as he he sauntered casually down the middle of Redblade's main street, looking neither to right nor to left. Once he shivered slightly from the penetrating cold.

Happy was afraid. He had always known fear, when going into a fight. His was the kind of fear that earns medals and makes heroes. It quickened every nerve within him, made all his senses clearer.

The main street of Redblade had seemed to him miles long as he had begun his fateful walk. Now it suddenly narrowed and shortened as he watched a human animal glide soundlessly along it towards him.

Fang made the deserted street crowded. He seemed to fill it and dominate it, and surround it with terror. His confidence was an aura. He walked with contempt for the snow on his light-treading moccasins.

The sweat came out on Happy's smooth chest. Though tall, he seemed thin and meagre beside the hulking brute approaching him. His movements had become jerky and awkward, in contrast to the panther-rhythm of his enemy. An old woman's lips moved stiffly in prayer as she watched him. She had seen Fang Ritchie beat her grandson to a pulp.

The fang-like teeth of the man who owned Redblade body and soul were more prominent than ever in the grin with which he greeted Happy. The grin seemed to say that this was humorous business to be soon finished. But the cold, little eyes took in the loose muscles of his opponent, and then held a new wariness.

Fifty feet away, Happy stopped. It was now or never for his plan.

"Fang Ritchie!" he called out.

The big man halted.

"You're through in Redblade, Fang Ritchie!" Happy's voice was raised loudly and clearly, intended to carry from one end of the street to the other. "You've been getting away with murder . . . yeah, murder! . . . for years, but your number's up."

The red came up in Fang's neck again.

"Why, you—"

Hap cut in on the bellow.

"You've been foolin' a lot of people, Fang, but you don't fool me. There's only one way to deal with bullies. That's to lick 'em. Fang Ritchie, I aim to make you beg for me to let you be!"

The silence of the street was broken by a sudden cheer from the houses on Hap's right, where most of his supporters had gathered. The audacity of the taunts had fired their hearts.

THE cheer turned Fang's ugly face crimson. Hap's satisfied glance told him that his ruse had succeeded. Fang was shaking with rage. He set himself for the onslaught.

It came. With a roar like that of a wounded bull moose, Fang charged across the distance that remained between them. His knife glinted so in the sun that voices called out to Hap in warning, for the tall young man stood easily, not making a move towards the weapon in his own sheath. Fang was on Hap who had not even drawn his knife. His blade flashed forward and met unresisting air, as Hap ghosted from under the blow, brought up his left hand to Fang's knife-wrist, dropped to one knee and heaved the big man over his shoulder. Fang sprawled ridiculously in the snow.

"Finish him, son!" called the excited voice of Craik.

Hap waited, breathing easily, exhibiting a confidence he did not feel. He saw incredulity chase the rage from Fang's face. Fang was on his feet like a huge cat, spitting obscenities, but no longer rushing in.

Fang feinted with his knife, then kicked brutally for Hap's groin. He found his heel caught in mid-air. An irresistible wrist forced him over on his face into the snow. His knife flew from his hand. But still Hap made no move.

"The boy's a fool!" groaned Craik. "He could have finished the fight either one of those times. It can't go on this way!"

"Don't you believe it!" said Jack Arnold. "I see what Hap's up to. He wants to make Fang look silly. That's the one thing a man like Fang can't stand."

The knife was lost in the snow. Fang became frantic, expecting cold steel between his ribs at any moment. Hap caught the shine of the lost knife. He bent swiftly, picked it up, made as though to throw it at Fang. Fang screamed. Hap laughed, and the laugh was echoed by his supporters, as Hap contemptuously threw the knife and it stuck quivering in the snow an inch from Fang's nose.

"Grab it an' get on your feet!" said Hap.

In the balcony, almost over the heads of the battling men, Rose had freed her wrists and was working on the ropes holding Lady's. The drama of the fight held them both for moments at a time.

"He shouldn't have given the brute the chance," Lady whispered fiercely. "Oh, but he's magnificent!"

"He'll make out all right," Rose replied briefly, and the other girl looked at her oddly.

"Does he mean something special to you, Rose?" asked Lady, unable to account for the sharp jealousy that such a thought brought her.

"There isn't time for that, now," Rose answered roughly. "There! That'll do it! Here, let me rub your wrists to get back the circulation and then we'll figure out a way to get out of here while there's all the excitement below."

Remembering his promise to his "captains" to move the fight as far from the *New Eldorado* as possible, Hap turned his back on the fallen Fang and walked rapidly down the street. One of Fang's men drew a bead on him with a rifle, but Harry knocked the weapon down.

"Not yet," he said. "Let the boss finish the punk."

But when Harry's eyes turned back to the street they were troubled.

Hap had moved with deceptive slowness. He had covered fifty yards down the road before Fang had decided it was not a trick, had recovered his knife, and had taken after him. A concerted shout of "Look out!" from his supporters gave Hap the warning he needed. He broke into a sprint, and drew the enemy another fifty yards from the *New Eldorado* before he turned.

The men met toe-to-toe, wrist-to-wrist, Indian style. Fang's tremendous strength was instantly apparent to Hap, as he felt his arm bent back and back. Just as it seemed it would crack at the shoulder, Hap gave with it, hooked his leg about Fang and brought him crashing to the ground.

Fang was up in a flash, moving with catlike grace and more confidence now that he had tested his opponent's strength. Soon one of these tricks would fail the young man, and then it would be his turn. There would be no softness about him, if he got the advantage.

Steel scraped on steel, as their knives met like swords. Fang withdrew, made a swift parry and lunge. Red suddenly appeared in the fleshy part of Hap's armpit. Fang suddenly brought in a straight left to Hap's jaw that staggered the younger man. He went down, and Fang went after him with his knife, only to meet slashing feet. Avoiding the "sabot," Fang circled swiftly with upraised knife. The pace was telling on him. He had been living softly and was not the man he had been. He knew he would have to finish the fight swiftly.

Arching his back, Hap threw himself to his feet in one motion. Fang, who had been about to throw himself upon the young man, recovered himself, but not enough. An elbow caught him on the jaw. As he staggered, Hap slashed him twice on the face, making a large X.

"He's marking him!" exulted Craik.

Howling with pain, the blood running from his face to his shoulders and down his chest, Fang lost all reason again and attacked viciously. His assault was not to be denied, and Hap felt the sear of the knife across his abdomen. As he stepped

back, the knife slashed at his fighting-arm, giving it a bad cut.

Fang sensed the turn of the battle. He dashed in recklessly, and threw a strangle-hold about Hap's throat. He doubled the younger man with a knee in the stomach, and brought his knife around to stab Hap in the back, when Hap came to life desperately, and stamped him with all his might on a moccasined foot. There was crunch of bone and an inhuman howl from Fang, who danced back instinctively, his mouth full of foul curses to ease the fire in his brain.

They came together once more. Steel sparked steel. Fang found the southpaw change awkward to handle. He strained to reach his left hand for Hap's throat. The dagger slashed at his fingers, severing one. A hard backhand came from nowhere and broke his other wrist, his knife falling from nerveless fingers. The steel hilt of Hap's knife caught him flush in the jaw. He screamed with pain.

Fang fought more and more weakly against the rain of blows that came from the merciless hilt of that knife. He tried to hold himself, but he was sliding, sliding, into blackness.

A hand pulled him up by the hair. He looked into ice-blue eyes.

"Admit you are through in Redblade," commanded Hap, not showing how near he was to the end of his own strength.

Fang summoned the stubbornness to shake his tortured head. That head sang with the buffets it received.

"Admit you're through," repeated Hap.

"I'm through," the human wreck muttered through bloody lips.

Hap turned him around and cooly booted Fang into unconsciousness.

"Let's go!" said Jack Arnold.

The victor turned at the sporadic firing, but there was a haze before his eyes. He looked at the boiling mass of men around the *New Eldorado,* and, as he looked, the mass blurred and became one and then nothing. Hap fell across Fang. Both were still.

POP WINTERS' eyes twinkled out from the swathes of bandages. The room was crowded with people, all wanting to shake the battered hand of the man in the bed next to him, who was covered in almost as many bandages as the old prospector himself.

"That's the trouble with these young fellers," Pop told the beautiful young woman who sat at the foot of his bed, and whose eyes often went to where Rose Shannon held Hap's hand. "They start fights. Now, when I was young——consarn it, Hap! From what I hear, I missed the best gol-dinged scrap of the century! How I'd love to have seen it."

Craik rushed in with a bundle of papers.

"Special extra!" he shouted.

"You'll have to be quieter," said the doctor.

"Quieter, hell!" answered the explosive newsman. "Look at this heading, 'Mounties arrest Fang Ritchie!' Hap, my boy, you have freed the town of Redblade. You can be anything you want to be here."

A redhead came shyly around the end of the bed.

"Hullo," said Red Arnold, and stood and stared at Rose Shannon.

"Hullo," said Rose softly. "I know. Don't tell me. You're Red!"

"So you know my sister, eh?" asked Hap.

"Sister?" Pop pricked up his ears. "Didn't know you had a sister."

"Didn't know you had a daughter. Rose is really my step-sister. I lost track of her for some time, and you can imagine what a shock it was for me to find her in Ritchie's place. I would have tried to get her out right away, but I had to find out what happened to you, Pop."

The old eyes peeping out from under the bandages grew moist.

"Ain't many would have done that for an old coot like me, eh, Lady?"

"Not many, father," answered Lady. "Perhaps we can show Hap our gratitude when he gets better."

Hap grinned boyishly.

Nanook pushed Oo-lik against the rock and charged at the caribou.

OO-LIK, THE POLAR BEAR

By BURTON R. PECK

This is the first in a series of highly exciting stories about the king of the Arctic animal world—the majestic polar bear. Mr. Peck, the author, is familiar with all phases of Arctic life, having made numerous expeditions into this strange and fascinating snow-ice country.

FOUR MILES north of Alaska, close against the shore ice, lay the drifting pack, its millions of broken cakes upraised like sails to catch the roaring winds. To the southward, just above the snow-capped peaks, a saffron sun shone weakly through the murky haze. In this shadowless world, with its leaden sky, no living creature stirred; the danger of snow-blindness—or freezing—was too great.

The sun, absent since November, now rose late each morning above the mountains, described a small arc, and slumped downward, as if discouraged at the prospect of transforming this wilderness of ice and snow. But each day it climbed higher. It was now March; the long Arctic night was at an end.

From the cold and cheerless surface of the ice-covered Shaviovik whirled long, wavering lines of drifting snow, waist high

and fine as tropic sand. Hour after hour these powdery crystals were carried on the wings of the wind. On each side of the river, towering cut-banks, their perpendicular sides blown clear of snow, gleamed darkly against the spotless white.

Under one of these frowning bluffs, in a cavern hollowed out of a hard-packed snowdrift, lay Nanook and Oo-lik, her six-weeks-old cub. The March winds that howled along the river bank were sharp with frost; but within the den the temperature was comparatively high for polar bears. Reindeer moss, soft, warm, and spongy, insulated the mother and her cub from the frozen ground.

Wandering, in her clumsy fashion, over the chaotic surface of the drifting pack, the mother bear had traveled steadily southward until she reached the mouth of the Shaviovik. It was then early in November. She had ambled up the ice-covered highway until instinct told her it would be safe to make the den in which her cub would be born. Burrowing into a hardened drift with her sturdy black claws, she had hollowed out a cavern large enough to enable her to turn around. With the exception of a hole kept open by her warm breath, softly falling snow filled the entrance during the first night.

Nanook was equally at home in the water, on the ice floes, or on land. The only enemies she feared were the little brown creatures who dressed in the skins of caribou, drove teams of wolf-like dogs, and carried smoke-sticks; and she had located her den far from the coast-wise trails of the Eskimo hunters. Her dark eyes grew soft as she watched her sleeping progeny. Of the cubs she had brought into the world every two years, including one pair of twins, Oo-lik was by far the finest. His fur was the whitest and silkiest. It curled in tight ringlets. His stubby, rounded ears; tiny, pointed black nose; sharp, but as yet insignificant milk teeth; and curved black claws were his chief characteristics. In Oo-lik's tiny veins flowed the blood of a thousand generations of Arctic kings.

Under his mother's steady eyes the cub stirred restlessly, lifted his head from the ground, returned his mother's solicitous gaze, and dropped off to sleep again. The old she-bear followed suit.

OF ALL the Eskimos who lived on the north coast of Alaska, only Atuniak left the coast during the winter; the others hunted seals and polar bears; and trapped Arctic foxes. But Atuniak harnessed his dogs late in February each year, and mushed them up the Shaviovik and into the mountains. There he traded tea, hardbread, ammunition, and traps for caribou hides, mountain-sheep skins, and the backfat of the caribou. He was the only contact the inland Eskimos had with the coast-dwellers.

Atuniak's team of five dogs, homeward bound along the right bank of the Shaviovik, were being urged on by their master late that afternoon, when Tootlurak, the leader, suddenly lifted his nose into the air and swerved sharply up the incline. Atuniak yelled; in words he had learned from the whalers he cursed Tootlurak and his ancestors. The leader tried to obey, but the other four dogs dragged him and the sled up the slope.

The Eskimo stepped on the brake and brought the team to a halt, unharnessed Tootlurak, and waved him on. The leader stopped within a hundred feet, and sniffed at the snow. Atuniak could see a wisp of steam rising in the twilight. This meant only one thing: The den of a she-bear and her cub. The Eskimo grasped his leader's collar, and brought him back to the sled.

"We have no shovel, and it is dark. We will come back in the morning; it is only twenty miles," he explained to Tootlurak, as if his leader were a human being.

NANOOK was smoothing the cub's shining coat with her tongue when she heard the commotion. Her first instinct was to stand erect, that was her best fighting posture. But the low ceiling made this impossible. She herded Oo-lik to the innermost part of the cavern, and stood there, ready to meet the attack. The dog's footsteps on the hard-packed snow filled her with fear. But soon she could hear the noise of the sled-runners growing fainter, and she realized that she and her cub were safe. But only for the moment; before daybreak she must put as many miles between herself and the Eskimo as possible.

When she was sure the little brown man and his dogs had departed, she set

to work digging her way out of the den. This was a difficult task, for the heat from her body had slightly melted the walls of snow, and a sheet of ice had formed. She was weak from lack of food. Moreover, her claws had grown long from disuse. Once she penetrated the wall, however, the rest of the digging was accomplished in a few minutes.

Grasping Oo-lik by the nape of the neck, as a cat carries a kitten, Nanook clambered up the incline and out into the crisp March air. She deposited the cub on the ground, and indicated to him, in no uncertain terms, that from now on he was on his own. Then she set off at a fast walk toward the east.

Nanook had gone without food for several days before hibernating, in order to cleanse her stomach and intestinal tract. Now, after months of fasting and the ordeal of motherhood, she craved lichens, willow buds, and reindeer moss. She had been plump and even-tempered at the beginning; now she was gaunt and crochety. She turned impatiently when Oo-lik fell behind, and cuffed him with her forepaw. He whimpered for a moment at this rough treatment—but he didn't fall behind again. Even his immature mind realized that this was an emergency.

This was the cub's second taste of punishment. Once, in the den, he had caught his mother's lower lip between his sharp teeth; shaken his head and pulled with all his puny strength. The she-bear, groaning with pain, had lifted a powerful forepaw and sent him spinning against the wall. Jarred throughout his slight frame, Oo-lik had realized, after a moment, that he was being punished.. The cub's respect for his mother had dated from that instant. He wouldn't bite his mother any more, he resolved. At least, not until she was in a more playful mood.

Certainly she was not in a playful mood now; she was running for her life. The cub did not appreciate this; he was dazed by the immensity of his mother's world. The velvet blackness and the blinking stars fascinated him. It had been calm and cold in the cavern; now they faced into the wind, and the breeze had a crisp quality that Oo-lik found invigorating. Only he wished his mother wouldn't walk so fast! Didn't she realize that he was just a little bear?

Wanted—One Miracle

One of the strangest sights of the Gold Rush days was seen at Nome, Alaska, when hundreds of prospectors stood on the sea front and waited for an expected Northeast storm to blow the waters back and thus enable them to pan the rich sand then uncovered. Many a substantial stake was obtained while the wind held the waters at bay.

Within the first hour the mother bear stopped, not to rest or to nurse her cub, but to dig through the thin crust of snow for reindeer moss. She browsed for half an hour on the succulent herbage, greedily swallowing the icy particles that clung to the moss and melted in her cavernous mouth. Her first meal in more than three months! She was still too weak to travel, and her feet had become tender during the hibernating period. Moreover, she was tired.

NANOOK awoke to find herself and Oo-lik covered with a blanket of snow. She stirred the cub with a gentle movement of her forepaw, got to her feet, and shook herself. The cub followed his mother's example. Snow—millions of flakes, like the great breast feathers of a swan—were drifting lazily earthward. It was the cub's first sight of this phenomenon. Greedily he licked off the flakes as they fell upon his little black nose.

Edging close to his mother, Oo-lik began a search for milk. She sat on her haunches as he guzzled like a little pig, filling his capacious paunch almost to the bursting point. His mother finally shut off the supply merely by standing on all fours, and stalking off to the eastward. Her shoulder muscles slid smoothly under the loose and unkempt skin. She followed no trail, but was prompted by instinct. After another day of willow buds, grass, and moss, she would head northward to the drifting ice-fields on which, for fourteen years, she had made her home.

Oo-lik's first intimation that their Arctic domain was peopled by other creatures came that afternoon. The snow had stopped, and now the sun was bright on this chill, fantastic land. Far in the distance were the mountains, their peaks

etched with a ribbon of silver. To the westward the Shaviovik followed a tortuous course to the sea. About them was a vast empire, blanketed with snow, scintillating in the afternoon sun.

To the southwest, above the Endicott Range, the cub saw this shining orb which seemed not only to be the source of all light, but which apparently was responsible for the comfortable feeling of warmth which enveloped him. When this glistening sphere hung in the sky, there was light and warmth; when it was not there, the March wind penetrated his fur and chilled him to the bone. A thin layer of fat already was forming to protect him from these Arctic breezes; and, had the cub known it, he would have been well insulated from the cold had not the arrival of the Eskimo dogs compelled his mother to make a premature exit.

This boundless world, with its blue sky and white surface, was empty except for himself and his mother. The cub was appalled by its grandeur and magnitude. Nanook, however, did not seem to be impressed.

Mother and cub had reached a clump of stunted willow trees, with Oo-lik a few feet in the rear, when a dozen white, feathered creatures, with a terrific drumming of wings, soared into the air. They circled about, and actually flew over the she-bear and her cub. Nanook stopped in surprise; and her offspring, thoroughly frightened by the noise, hid between his mother's forelegs. In all the six weeks of his existence he had seen no tangible evidence of danger, but instinct now warned him to seek cover. When finally he found courage to emerge from the protection of his mother's cream-white coat, the whirring ptarmigan had gone. However, in that short space of time she had risen tremendously in his esteem; apparently she was afraid of nothing. Everything fled before her except that two-legged creature, man. She was the Queen of this icy Empire and he was her son! The thought stiffened Oo-lik's backbone; he was no longer afraid.

They continued their trek to the eastward. When the cub felt the need of a liquid to supplement his mother's milk, he scooped up a mouthful of snow, as he had seen her do. His feet were tender, and he stepped gingerly, picking his way carefully over the hard-packed snow. Finally he halted to lick his lacerated feet. His mother plodded on until she came to a knoll from which most of the snow had drifted. Here was reindeer moss in abundance, and she browsed about, snipping off the tender shoots. She could hear her cub whimpering, but she steeled herself against a show of maternal solicitude; he must learn that the Arctic was a hard school. He was all she had in the world. Her other cubs—and her mates—had scattered to the four winds. In less than two years Oo-lik too, would forsake her, and spend the rest of his life roaming over the Great White Desert that stretched from Alaska to the North Pole. But Nanook's compassion finally overcame her resolve. She walked back to where he was still licking the soles of his paws.

The sun was losing its warmth-giving power as it sank behind the mountains, and the brisk wind was penetrating the cub's woolly coat. She sat upright, and indicated that it was time for his supper. Forgetting for the moment, his paw troubles, the cub stood on his hind feet and nursed as long as his mother's patience lasted. Then, sheltered by a knoll from the cutting breeze, they curled up on the spongy moss and slept. It had been a trying day for both mother and cub.

NANOOK awoke before dawn, refreshed and ready to travel. She reared up on her hind feet, and sampled the air with her sensitive nostrils. Carefully she inspected the snow-covered tundra, gazing searchingly in all directions. The cub, now completely awake, imitated her every movement. He was learning to take his place in this glistening white world.

It was the frozen sea, far in the distance, that the mother bear scrutinized longest—so long that Oo-lik grew impatient. The drifting ice-pack was her hunting ground, and in the sky above it were reflected the conditions to be found there. The sky was the mirror which Nature provided. On this occasion the experienced old she-bear could see, written in the heavens in the form of "water sky," indications, here and there, of open water. She had put her digestive tract in order; now

she craved the warm, red flesh of the seal, with its juicy outer layer of blubber. The seals, released from their winter breathing holes by the breaking up of the ice fields, would be swimming about in the open lanes.

In her plans for an abundant future, Nanook had forgotten the incident which led to her hasty departure from the den. Now she was abruptly reminded of the ingenuity and tenacity of the little two-legged creatures whose helpers in the chase were the wolf-like dogs. First, she became aware of mingled shouts and the howling of dogs to the westward. She waited only a moment to determine the direction from which the sounds came. Her paws were sore; she herself was weak and emaciated. Nevertheless, she must make a run for it; must escape to the open water, and hide her cub under the overhanging floes.

Oo-lik had heard the shouts of the Eskimo hunter and the howling of the dogs, but to his inexperienced ears there was nothing ominous about them. He was, however, concerned when he saw the agitated state of his mother. She was concerned when she realized that her progeny was too small to outdistance a dog. Nor could she herself hope to escape them, carrying the cub on her back, since she would be restricted in her movements: If she galloped at full speed, Oo-lik would tumble off in the first hundred yards. Yet flight was her only recourse. Having made up her mind, she sat on the tundra and indicated, in no uncertain manner, what was expected of the cub. Alarmed by the turn of events, he clambered up her back, grasped her thick fur just behind the shoulder, and hung on as she broke into a moderate gallop. Each step left a bloody footprint in the snow. By the time she had covered a mile, the shouts and the howling of the dogs could no longer be heard.

It was well for their safety, however, that Nanook did not slacken speed, for she was dealing with a resourceful adversary. Atuniak, the Eskimo, had to be resourceful if he was to survive in the Arctic.

By the time she had covered the second mile, the mother bear was winded. And, while Oo-lik had been able to hang on, the effort had completely exhausted him. There was nothing for her to do but make a stand. Off to the left an outcropping of rock offered protection for her rear; she ambled over to it and lay down to recuperate. The cub jumped clear, and began to lick her face with his little tongue. If only he were a grown bear, no one would dare to hurt his mother!

Had Atuniak taken time enough to unharness his dogs before turning them loose on the trail, they might have caught up with their quarry sooner. Certainly the wolf-like creatures could have held Nanook and her cub at bay until their master appeared. But in his haste, the Eskimo hunter merely cut the traces and waved them on; he would follow.

Unemcumbered by the sled and its passenger, the Eskimo's dogs set out at top speed, following the bloody imprints in the snow. They had not seen the mother bear and her cub, but they knew from experience what they would find at the end of the trail. In less than a minute they were out of Atuniak's sight. Unlike the hound, they did not bark; so Nanook had no warning of their approach. She barely had time to back up against the rock and place Oo-lik in a safe position at her feet, when the huskies were upon her. The youngest, fastest, and least experienced member of the team leaped at her throat. This was Nanook's least vulnerable spot, and the dog paid for his rashness with his life: She caught him about the shoulders with her huge paws, opened her cavernous mouth, and crushed his head like an eggshell.

The leader was the craftiest of the remaining four; he devoted his time to snapping at the old she-bear's heels, and leaping out of range of her sweeping claws. Working in concert with an older dog, he dashed in and out, like a boxer feinting out an opponent. Meanwhile, the other two made half-hearted efforts to reach the

Human Dynamo

In the cold winter days in the far north, dogs turn away from a pat from a human hand. The reason is that this friendly action creates a sudden sharp tingle of static electricity which the dogs soon learn to dodge.

cub. If Atuniak had unharnessed his dogs the plan might have worked. But in one of her mighty sweeps, the mother bear's claws caught in the webbing of the leader's harness and his head was dashed against the rock.

With the death of their leader, the other three dogs lost interest in the fight. They were there to hold the quarry until the arrival of their master, but they were not going to risk their lives in the task. So they sat in a semi-circle, licking their chops, inviting a charge by the mother bear so they could avenge the death of their leader by snuffing out the life of the cub. But the wily Nanook, taking the cub on her back once more, set out for the frozen sea.

For a time the huskies ranged alongside, snapping at her heels, and trying to hamstring her, but she was utterly contemptuous of their puny efforts. Once she swung around, and caught an unwary tormenter full in the ribs with her forepaw, unseating Oo-lik in her quick movement. The dog described an arc, and was dead before he struck the ground. The other two gave up the chase.

Atuniak knew when he was beaten; also that he was fortunate in having two dogs left to haul the sled back to his igloo at the mouth of the Shaviovik.

NANOOK had intended to keep up her lumbering gallop until nightfall. But when there were no longer indications of pursuit, she slumped weakly to the ground. Her breath came in long gasps, and for a time Oo-lik thought his mother surely would die. Alternately he licked her face, and stood guard over her recumbent form. He was hungry, but he would wait until his mother felt better.

As the old she-bear lay there, utterly spent, down the valley came the menacing and unmistakable wolf scent. Nanook had no fear of wolves—nor of any other animal in her domain; she thought only of her cub's safety. Deep in her spacious chest there rumbled a warning. She got to her feet.

Oo-lik squared away for immediate combat. His diminutive roach stood stiff along the back of his sturdy neck, like the mane of a lion cub. He had not been out in this Arctic world very long, but already he realized that it was a place where only the crafty and powerful survived. He was no weakling, but everything was unfamiliar, and therefore to be feared. He had no idea what was in the wind, literally speaking, but he was resolved to protect his mother, come what may.

Nanook's twitching nostrils sampled the breeze; the cub elevated his nose, and sniffed noisily. The crisp air was filled with smells which he could not classify; but there was one among them which seemed to be on the ominous side. The longer he sniffed, the more certain he became that somewhere in the valley there was an unknown menace. His sense of smell, even in its rudimentary state, was able to detect another animal odor. He did not associate this odor with danger. It was simply an unfamiliar smell, to be remembered and classified. To his mother, however, it was well known. It meant food!

Borne on the wireless of the wild folk—the wind—the blended odors grew stronger. Then, seemingly driven by an overpowering fear, a herd of forty or fifty caribou thundered over a rise. To the cub, these awkward creatures, with their unwieldy horns and slender legs, were simply another novel sight in his mother's amazing world. He had never tasted caribou—or any other meat. But his mother, who had eaten no meat since the previous November, saw in the cows and young bulls many a tempting meal.

The herd, a moving grayish-brown carpet strongly silhouetted against the snow-covered valley, swung in her direction. They were close to complete exhaustion. On their left flank—far enough away to escape the murderous hoofs and ripping thrusts of polished horns, yet near enough to hamstring the first straggler—loped a huge, grayish-tan dog wolf; and on the right, his mate. Three of their year-old cubs brought up the rear. They galloped easily and tirelessly over the crusted snow, through which their quarry broke at every step.

The crafty Nanook knew the ways of wolves and caribou. She lay flat on the tundra, ready to spring. Nature, in her protective coloration scheme, had given her a cream-white fur which blended fairly well with the surrounding ice and snow.

The old she-bear also was aware of her limitations: On land, she was no match, in the matter of speed, for the long-legged caribou. But today she had no need for agility.

The caribou were too intent upon escaping from their ancient foe to notice the polar bear. It was not until the panic-stricken animals were within a dozen steps of the shaggy Nanook that she rose, in all her majesty. She was a fearful specter, standing there, eight feet tall, with the sun at her back. The caribou were caught between two fires.

Nanook did not "woof" as a grizzly bear would have done; she hissed, like a farm-yard goose. Her lips were drawn back in a snarl, displaying worn, yellowish teeth. Her bulky, upright form, with fore-paws outstretched, were enough to throw the herd into confusion, which was exactly her plan. One or two caribou, under such circumstances, could be depended upon to dash off in the wrong direction. Once separated from the herd, their doom would be sealed.

The herd was led by inexperienced young bulls. It is not likely that they had ever seen a polar bear. When Nanook rose to her full height, they sprang to the right and left, and the stampeding animals flowed past her. One young bull, separated from his mother, tried to regain her side; he was overtaken by the dog-wolf, and hamstrung. The dog-wolf's mate accounted for another straggler; and in the momentary confusion the wolf cubs slashed the throats of three others.

Maddened by the taste of blood, the swifter yearling killers raced ahead, their mouths dripping a pinkish-white foam. Ignoring the horns of bulls and cows alike, they closed in upon the hindmost caribou. Before the panicky animals could collect their scattered senses and present a united front, eight of their number lay stretched along the valley floor. The others escaped only because the wolves, their lust for killing satiated for the moment, gathered about to feast upon two of the slaughtered caribou.

Oo-lik, during the carnage, stood stoutly at his mother's side, thrilled by the wanton killing and shaking with suppressed excitement. His delicate but untrained sense of smell detected an odor, heavy and sweetish, which he was unable to classify: The smell of warm, rich blood. His mother noticed it, too. She had fed on lichens and other growing things since her departure from the den; but she was carnivorous by nature. Now she walked over to the nearest animal; the caribou was still kicking spasmodically. Her wide jaws and sabre teeth clamped down upon the back of the neck, breaking the vertebrae. It was the same sort of bite with which she dispatched a seal, simple and effective.

Nanook's greatest desire was not for meat, but fat. She tore into the layer of tallow which lined the caribou's back. Under ordinary conditions, a two-inch layer of fat insulated her own body against the chill waters and icy winds. But that had all been absorbed during the period of hibernation. Now she was in a fair way to accumulate another protective layer. She gouged out the entire layer of back-fat on one side of the carcass before turning her attention to the nourishing meat. She paid no attention to the wolves; when she wanted another carcass she would brush them aside.

The Big Race

One of the most dramatic races in the Klondike stampede resulted when ownership to a certain claim lapsed and, on a given date, was declared vacant. Before midnight a dozen men gathered to try their luck at re-staking the claim. By some process of elimination the number was whittled to two. At midnight a Swede and a Canadian were tensed at the claim's edge. The starting shot from a Mounted Policeman's pistol still echoed as they drove the first stakes. The race was on! It was 78 miles to Fortymile and the recording office —eighteen miles on foot down Bonanza Creek to Dawson City; sixty miles with dog-team to Fortymile. They had to make it by four p.m. First one led, then the other. The Canadian sprinted forward, then the Swede. A few miles from the goal the dogs gave out—dropped from sheer exhaustion. The contestants ploughed forward on foot. Plain guts carried them through the last mile. Reeling, weaving, staggering, they reached the steps of the Record Office. There their strength failed—neither man could lift his feet over the threshold. They tried to call out to the official but their gasping breath was only a wheeze. In the doorway they collapsed together—dead-beat and in a dead-heat! The recorder registered the claim as a partnership and, such is life—it proved to be worthless!

Her cub, however, regarded these predatory beasts with considerable respect, if not fear. It seemed to him that his mother might show some concern for his safety, instead of gorging herself. He came close for protection, and watched her as she tore great mouthfuls of meat from the saddle of a young bull. Oo-lik was only mildly interested; the appetite for meat which would influence his whole future had not yet been awakened. But as he stepped nearer, sniffed the raw flesh, and licked a portion from which the blood ran freely, the cub came into his own. It was his first taste of blood. He was no longer a baby; in fact, he was as large as a full-grown raccoon. He thrust his nose alongside his mother's drooling jaws. The meat was warm, and it exuded a rich, appetizing odor.

The cub inhaled the savory smell, sank his sharp white teeth into the tender flesh, and tugged. A small morsel came away in his jaws, and instinctively he clamped his back teeth upon it to squeeze out the juice. Almost before he realized it, the delicious bit of tenderloin was slipping down his throat. He seized another strip, and yanked until it came loose. Rising to his feet, he shuffled over to the caribou's neck, and lapped up some of the blood; it was still warm. Never again would he be completely satisfied with milk. Already he was as confirmed a carnivore as his mother.

IN THE next three days the mother bear ate from forty to fifty pounds of caribou meat and back-fat for her daily meal. Under ordinary circumstances, she did not dine on "cold" portions; she liked freshly-killed or semi-putrid meat. But she was twenty miles inland from the sea-coast, where seals might be had; her feet and those of her cub were in the process of being toughened for the long spring journey out onto the drifting ice-fields. Moreover, in the valley were more dead caribou than she had ever seen. The opportunity to build up her strength, and that of her cub, was not to be overlooked. So she gorged herself each morning on meat, back-fat, caribou hair and reindeer moss. The back-fat was her favorite portion; but it was too concentrated, even for a polar bear. Nanook's instinct, therefore, prompted her to consume a certain proportion of caribou hair and moss for roughage.

At the beginning of her gluttonous orgy, it seemed as if the old she-bear might stay with the carcasses until she had stripped them all. The caribou carcasses had been laid at her feet, as it were, in Providential fashion, like a walrus or a whale carcass frozen in the ice-pack. She accepted them without question. She would greedily stuff herself until her distended stomach almost touched the ground. Then, stupefied by the heavy meal, she would waddle over to a nearby snow-bank, out of the wind, and fall into a deep sleep.

But such a state of affairs, in this uncertain land, was too nearly perfect to last indefinitely. With the return of the sun, the nights were gradually becoming shorter, and the days correspondingly longer. As the sun climbed higher in the heavens, its rays increased in power, and the carcasses began to decay. This resulted in the dissemination of delectable odors. These were carried by the breezes —and the foxes, ravens, gulls, and snowy owls were not slow in picking them out of the air. They came from all directions. The screeches of the gulls, the yapping and barking of the white foxes, and the strident protests of the ravens, made sleep for the mother bear out of the question. Late in the afternoon of the third day, she and Oo-lik set a course to the northward—toward the Great White Desert. She had shown her cub how to lick the soles of his feet, worn from travel; and now her feet and those of her cub were in fair condition. No longer did they leave bloody foot-prints in the snow. True, she might have to go without food for a couple of days, until she could reach the sea-ice. But she had done it before and she could do it again,

Tremaine held his fire until the very last instant . . . until Old Threelegs leaped.

MAN-BAIT

By John M. Cunningham

Tremaine didn't know which one to fear worse—the cunning, half-crazed wolf he was hunting or Turnbull, his slinking, inscrutable partner.

TREMAINE knew one thing: he would not kill Turnbull. No matter what Turnbull did, he would not kill him. He would find some other way.

He lay in the bunk, listening to the wolf. If only his dogs were still alive! He thought of Turnbull, lying beside him, and the hate burned brighter in him. He fought to quiet it. If only the dogs were here instead of lying out somewhere on the range full of Turnbull's strychnine.

For the fifth night Threelegs had howled from the ridge behind the cabin. For the third night Tremaine had waited for him to come down, had lain helpless in the dark bunk beside Turnbull, listening to the whine of the starving beast out by the stable door, digging futilely at the deep baseboard to get at the terrified horse inside, listening to the furious growling as the wolf raced and leaped at the horse-cacass hanging from the tree.

Two nights ago he had tried a shot, aiming through the dark at the whine, had missed, and the wolf hadn't run. Now he lay nursing his two remaining cartridges in his pocket, where he constantly kept them to prevent Turnbull from getting them, and waited for dawn. Threelegs hadn't run, and that proved something. It proved he was no longer afraid of guns.

The cautious, wary old veteran, who had outsmarted every wolf-hunter in a hundred miles, was crazy.

Slowly the dead dark gave way to a faint grey light. There was no dawn—the snowclouds were too thick over the mountains—and the feeble light was more like dusk than morning. As Tremaine slid out of the blankets he heard Threelegs howl again from the ridge, and was happy for the first time in months. Threelegs wasn't quitting today to wait again for the night. He was too hungry to quit, and Tremaine knew he had him at last. This day he would offer himself to Threelegs, a hundred and eighty pounds of live bait. If he didn't stop the charge with the first shot, he had a second; and if the second missed —

Tremaine ran across the freezing floor to the stove and piled in chips and wood. He poured the last of the kerosene in on the smoking pile and huddled over it, waiting for it to blaze. They wouldn't need any light tonight. The hunt was ending.

And there was no need to hurry, now. Threelegs was waiting for him up on the ridge. In two hours he'd have him.

The stove popped quietly behind him. He watched Turnbull, still sleeping in the bunk. The thought flashed into his mind before he could stop it, and he let it stay. Now, of all times, would be the time to kill Turnbull—while he was still sleeping. Not because it would be quiet and simple, without scuffle or passion.

Turnbull deserved it by every law Tremaine had ever learned, and yet the thought sickened him, and he closed his mind against it. He didn't want human blood on his hands. With patience he could win out, as long as the lock of his will was fixed against his anger. And yet it was a risky business. The hatred was not one-sided, and there was no telling when Turnbull's jealousy and vindicativeness would override his cowardice. But it had to be that way—Tremaine would not attack.

He waited for Turnbull to wake. He could have gone ahead and fixed the oats himself but it was Turnbull's day to cook, and as things stood, Turnbull would take it as an affront, a usurpation. At least, he would pretend it was that, make a fight out of it.

Every little delay counted against Tremaine; if Turnbull, by delaying the mush, could cheat Tremaine out of half an hour's hunting he was that much closer to winning, which meant, since Turnbull no longer had a rifle, simply keeping Tremaine from getting Threelegs and the bounty. At this stage of the game, they might easily kill each other over a pot of oats, and it was not killing which Tremaine wanted. The victory consisted in getting the pelt of Threelegs, of riding down to Lovell to collect the five hundred dollar bounty. Turnbull had done everything possible to keep him from winning. The victory would be to win in spite of Turnbull. He would not bring on a fight by usurping Turnbull's duty at the stove this morning, even though the snow was bound to come today, force them out of the mountains, and so end the hunt.

Turnbull lay on his back in the bunk, the blankets wadded around him, heaped over his fat stomach, half covering his coarse red beard. For once he wasn't snoring. His mouth was closed, lending his sleeping face something almost like dignity, and all at once Tremaine found himself pitying the man. He was such a rat, such an underhanded coyote, that Tremaine actually felt sorry for him. Oh, it was easy to pity the sleeping. Sleep lent a pathetic innocence to their faces, stripped by their helplessness of guile, of evil, of greed, it left them like children. One could pity the sleeping as one praised the dead because they were no longer dangerous.

SUDDENLY he knew that Turnbull was not asleep. And he knew Turnbull was watching him from beneath lowered lids. He watched Turnbull, and all at once, he knew that Turnbull knew he had found him out, and they were staring into each other, across the cabin, neither admitting it, but both knowing it. Staring across the barriers of pretense, past all the weeks of careful control and secret manoeuvre, of antagonism smothered, of grudges piled and counter-piled, past all the weeks of silence. He looked in open secret straight into Turnbull, seeing for once the cold truth of the other's hate. It lay open between them, admitted; in this instant he knew it, and knew that Turnbull knew he knew it; ultimate mur-

der, peering out from wicked lids, watching like a wolf from a cage. Turnbull was letting him see it, and Tremaine read it: Turnbull was not going to let him get the wolf. He would rather kill him than see him win.

Then Turnbull moved his knees and groaned, indicating that he was waking up. He laid the covers back almost carefully and swung his legs over the side gently. He sat for a moment looking out of the window.

"Snow," Turnbull said, his voice fat with satisfaction.

"Frost," Tremaine corrected gently. "Just frost."

Long ago, when they had still been talking fairly freely, it had been agreed that they would leave at the first flake. They both had known, suffering out the deadly open winter, that when it came it would come in a blinding, house-high avalanche that would cut them off from Lovell. It was here now, it might begin any minute, and they would be wise to leave now. It was sixty miles to Lovell, and they needed all the time they could get. But it had been agreed that the first flake would be the signal, and with the rigid arbitrary doggedness of old men and children, they had stuck to it.

Turnbull sat and scratched his beard. Tremaine felt himself stiffening all over, as passion rose against his will, tensing his muscles despite himself. He had to wait before he could leave. He could skip the oatmush, but he had to cut the cards for the one horse, and this Turnbull would never do before breakfast.

Then Turnbull stepped to the floor, picked up his shirt, pants and boots and carried them to the stove. Tremaine, moving slowly, went to the window and sat down on an up-ended box. It wasn't only that the table and the rawhide chair crowded the stove end of the cabin, or that he disliked being near Turnbull. Turnbull always warmed his clothes before he put them on. And in the heat they stank.

Tremaine watched him stand the boots on top of the stove, near the edge, where they wouldn't burn; watched him hold the heavy woolen plaid shirt near the pipe to warm it. It was stiff with old sweat, frying grease, soot, dust, and game-blood. Only the tails were clean, showing the red, white and black checks. Turnbull had a kind of pride in the dirtyness of that shirt. A peculiar pride, the same that had led him to talk, long ago, of such things as "shooting the rust out of his rifle," instead of cleaning it; that made him unwilling to admit ignorance, or to take advice; that made him too stubborn to quit, and which slowly turned that stubbornness into an implacable spite.

HE THOUGHT back to the bar in Lovell where he had met him; where he had been impressed by Turnbull's talk of hunting; by his heartiness and sportiness. Tremaine had been broke. Turnbull had offered to finance the hunt. It had been all blow and whisky, Tremaine had found out too late. He had talked of taking old Threelegs as a sporting event, disregarding the bounty. Do the ranchers a favor, he had said.

He turned from the fat figure, now holding the pants to the pipe, and looked out of the window. The frost was half an inch deep, and it wasn't going to melt under that cold sky. He could see Threelegs' tracks patterning the deep white crystal, and followed them with his eyes to the slope of the hill. He seemed to have been heading up the little canyon. The game had been gone for three weeks, driven out by the deadly cold, but Threelegs had been eating something, and from the tracks in the frost, Tremaine for the first time got an idea of where the cache might be—not enough to keep him from snooping around the cabin but enough to keep him alive.

He could see his rifle-cupboard, nailed outside against the wall, beside the window, and remembered Turnbull's rifle. It had all begun with that.

Turnbull wouldn't clean it. He would come in and stand it in the corner. When the freeze set in, and Tremaine built a rifle-box outside, he scorned to use it. He still brought it in from the splitting cold, into the warm, moist air of the cabin, and Tremaine had seen the beads of sweat run down the barrel and warned him again. And one morning, Turnbull had picked it up and found that the firing pin had rusted tight in the receiver.

He knew he was licked then, as far as

getting Threelegs went, but he didn't quit. What had been more or less a sporting rivalry in the beginning as to who should get the wolf first now became a combat in earnest, with Turnbull trying to keep Tremaine from getting him at all.

Tremaine's three dogs had disappeared. A month later, Turnbull began laying out poison, using the strychnine Tremaine had brought up to keep the rats out of the horses' grain, and a sharp suspicion grew in Tremaine's mind as to what had happened to his dogs. Dogs didn't run away, as Turnbull had suggested. Threelegs could have killed all of them. But he could prove nothing. And Turnbull had been wise enough to wait a month before he began trying to get the wolf with poison.

As to the poison, he had met Tremaine's dry sarcasm with silence. Tremaine knew the wolf was wise to poison, and told the other so. But Turnbull persisted, claiming that hunger would drive Threelegs to it, after the cold drove the game out, and what cattle weren't under fence being fed in the lower range, were killed by the wolf and hunger-emboldened coyotes. He ignored Tremaine's remark that if the game left, he would be out of meat-bait himself long before Threelegs was stupid enough or crazy enough to eat it.

He paid no attention and kept right on. A month later Tremaine found out why.

One day when Turnbull's horse had been sick, Turnbull had taken Tremaine's. The horse had broken a foreleg, not two hundred yards from the cabin, and Turnbull had had to shoot it. Then he had dragged it home, hung it in one of the firs, and used it for bait. Not until all proof was impossible, did Tremaine realize that the horse might have been shot dead for bait, and its leg broken afterward.

Turnbull, fully dressed at last, thumped heavily across the cabin carrying the oat-pot. He went out and Tremaine heard him breaking ice in the water-barrel, then sloshing the pot around in the water. He disdained to use the clean can hanging on a nail over the barrel, no matter how black the bottom of the pot might be. He came back in, water slopping from the pot and slammed the door.

TREMAINE watched him reach down the quart can of oats and sift them through his fingers. For two weeks they had been robbing the horse, living on these oats. Each morning Turnbull would cut a steak from the carcass of the horse and hang it in the cabin to thaw. At night he would fry it, after pounding it with the back of the axe-head. Tremaine stuck to the oats. Turnbull never washed the knife, and he used it both to dice the poison into his slabs of bait, and to cut his evening steaks with. Nothing had happened to Turnbull so far, but Tremaine was cautious.

Turnbull added salt to the steaming mess, picked up his knife and went out again, taking the axe with him. In a moment Tremaine heard the whack of the blade biting into the carcass. The meat was frozen so hard that it sounded almost like wood.

Turnbull came back carrying two slabs of meat about as big as his hand, one for steak and the other for bait. He got the poison down from the shelf and began preparing his bait while they waited for the oats to finish cooking. The poison that had almost certainly killed Tremaine's dogs was there on the table; the meat of his horse, which almost certainly Turnbull had killed both for spite, and for bait, was there beside it. The dirty knife, almost perfect symbol of Turnbull himself, which he had brought up shining and new, which had chipped out at the first test and which hadn't been washed since, was there in Turnbull's dirty hand.

And Turnbull himself, the stubborn, stupid fool, sat there preparing bait for a wolf far too smart and experienced to eat it, still persisting after two months of ridiculous failure. Turnbull, his fat, round back hunched over, his almost orange hair dangling in dirty shreds over the greasy collar of his sporty shirt.

Tremaine turned to the window, unable to endure the sight of the man any longer. The smell of the snow seeped through the cracks into his nose. He made up his mind and turned. For once, Turnbull would have to cut before breakfast. He wasn't going to cheat him out of his last hunt.

"I'm going," he said. Turnbull's fat, pale face turned slowly. "Let's cut for the

horse now."

Turnbull looked away, frowning slightly. "It's going to snow."

"I know that. But it hasn't started yet."

Turnbull bit his lips.

"I want the horse," he said finally.

Tremaine stiffened. "We'll cut. We agreed on that." He went to the shelf and got the pack of limp cards. He laid it on the table in front of Turnbull. "Go ahead and cut."

Turnbull shoved his chair back from the table and sat there, staring at the cards. "I said I want the horse myself. It's my horse."

Tremaine started trembling. "We agreed to cut for it as long as there was only one horse." He cut the deck himself and turned up a queen of spades. "Go ahead. Beat it."

Turnbull looked up. His full, rather prominent brown eyes were stubborn. "I agreed as a favor to you. But it's still my horse. I've got a right to it." He licked his lips, and his eyes narrowed. "I need it to spread my bait."

"You can't use the horse, Turnbull. If you go out without a rifle, Threelegs'll tear you down. And I've got the rifle."

"If he's that hungry he'll eat my poison."

Tremaine wanted to call him all the things he thought him but he did not dare let the first word slip out. Once the first, it would not end until one of them was dead on the floor. His head began to burn. His hand slowly closed on the cards, twisting them.

"It's my horse," Turnbull repeated.

Tremaine slowly let go of the cards. He turned without a word, got his coat and went out of the cabin.

He stood by the rifle cupboard, trembling all over, fighting with himself. He took out the rifle and loaded it. His hand went out again for the door-latch, held motionless in the air for a moment, and then dropped. He turned and started off, following Threelegs' tracks. He did not glance up at the remains of his horse, hanging from the branch, that grotesque caricature of the animal he had once ridden, half skeleton, half raw, axe-gnawed meat. He kept his mind resolutely on the wolf.

THE tracks dipped into a small valley, and then went straight up between two spurs. He had not climbed this canyon for months. It wasn't the kind of place Threelegs would bed in, or care for, and yet the fresh tracks led straight up. The dark firs closed in on him. His feet slipped in the frost as he drove ahead. He stopped to catch his breath, and felt for wind. There was no wind—only the faint downdraft of air from the canyon above.

He pushed on up. Suddenly the up-track was joined by another, running down, which swerved up the side of the other spur, back toward the cabin. He stopped, knelt, and looked closely at the down-trail. The crystals of frost in the paw-print moved slightly. The wolf had gone down again not more than three minutes earlier. He got up, took the other cartridge from his pocket and loaded the rifle. He pushed on through a copse of fir, came out into a small clearing and saw the reason why the wolf had come up, and then gone back again.

The bodies were still frozen, lying in a welter of newly-dug earth. The wolf's paw-prints were all over the place. He had scented the grave, probably long ago, and in the extreme of hunger, had dug up the dogs as a last resort. They lay scattered where they had been dragged from the shallow trench, all of them gnawed to the bone, but still recognizable by their heads and by bits of fur and hair lying under the frost.

The jaws of the dogs were wide in agony, even as they had died. He kicked the dirt. A block of something like dark wood spun out. He picked it up. Meat, still frozen. He saw the slit in one side of it and pried it open. The crystals of poison lay glinting, hardly embedded. Turnbull had fixed this before he had developed his dicing technique. There must have been four or five pieces of bait. Three had been enough to kill the dogs. He slipped the evidence into his pocket.

At the same time that he heard Threelegs howl, the snow began to fall, first in big flakes, then in smaller, drier ones. The howl was faint, but it was certainly from the direction of the cabin. He broke into a run, slipping and sliding down the slope, then up the other spur toward the cabin.

From the ridge he saw the thin blue wisp of smoke from the stove-pipe. The wolf howled again somewhere beyond the cabin. He was laying siege to Turnbull and the horse. He went on down, keeping the rifle ready.

As he neared the cabin, he realized that the wolf was further down the slope, beyond the lower fringe of firs. Horse tracks lay blurred under the thin veil of snow before the cabin door. He looked in, and saw the bunk, stripped of blankets. He went inside. The saddle was gone, Turnbull's coat was gone, and that was as it should be. But the blankets were gone, and that was wrong. Turnbull had pulled out, leaving him stranded on foot, sixty miles from safety.

He ran out of the cabin and down the slope, following the horse-tracks. He dashed through the lower firs and stopped short at the edge of the meadow.

Out on the white flat, Turnbull sat on the ground. The horse, reins and stirrups flying, sped across the snow, the wolf running awkwardly after it, his game foreleg tucked up to his chest, losing ground at every leap. The wolf tripped and fell, sliding along the ground, then with an ungainly lunge got back onto its feet and whirled back toward Turnbull.

TREMAINE stood at the edge of the firs, watching, as the wolf, limping slowly, its head hanging, started toward the man. Turnbull got to his feet and ran desperately for the trees. The wolf broke into a lope, cut him off and stopped not fifty yards from Tremaine.

Turnbull stood in the snow, helpless, while the wolf stood sagging, trying to catch its breath. Tremaine stepped into the open. Turnbull saw him and slowly held up his arms in mute appeal. Tremaine smiled. He'd warned Turnbull, as he'd warned him about the rifle. And now the man stood helpless in the spot he'd left for Tremaine.

The wolf started forward for Turnbull. It was an easy shot but Tremaine made no move. When Turnbull had ridden away from the cabin, deserting him, he had forfeited all rights.

"Tremaine!" Turnbull cried. The sound of it chilled his heart, the despair and agony of terror, and suddenly his brain was clear and cold, all thought of vengeance wiped away. Turnbull was still a man. No matter what he had done, no matter how much he deserved whatever he got, Tremaine could not stand and watch him be torn to pieces. He raised the rifle slowly, hating himself for doing it, cursing his conscience, and pulled the trigger. The wolf collapsed in the snow. Turnbull fell to his knees, swayed a moment, and then sat down, his hands covering his face.

Tremaine swung down and across the meadow. Turnbull and the wolf were not twenty feet apart. He looked at the one and then at the other, sitting there in the sifting white. Turnbull looked up at him, his face dead white, his eyes still watery with fear. He looked at the rifle, and the fear rose to terror.

"Don't worry," Tremaine said. "I'm not going to kill you. I'm going to crucify you. I'm going to take you down to Lovell and tell every soul in the place just what you've done. And you're going to live with your reputation. You're going to walk the streets with people looking at you. There won't be a man in the state that will speak to you. The kids'll point at you to your face. And wherever you go, your name will be a stink with you. I swear I won't kill you, Turnbull. I wouldn't kill you for a thousand dollars. I've got the wolf and the bounty, and I'm going to have the pleasure of watching you slink along like a dog. You used every dirty trick you could think of to lick me. You should have been shot long ago.

"But I figured to beat you fair, beat you clean, and I have. Get on your feet and skin out my wolf. We haven't got much time."

He tossed Turnbull his knife. Turnbull skinned it out fast. He got to his feet, picked up one end of the pelt and with a terrific yank slung it into Tremaine's face. Tremaine staggered. Turnbull hurtled into him, as he clawed to free himself of the wet clinging hide, knocking the rifle out of his hand. When he stood free with the hide at his feet, Turnbull was standing with the rifle in his hands, grinning triumphantly.

"Nobody's going to hear about anything," he panted. "Nobody."

HE SAT again as he had sat that morning, on the box by the door, watching Turnbull fry his last steak while he waited for the horse. The rifle was on him, he had no chance to move. And even if he could move, there was nothing he could do. He did not know what Turnbull planned to do, whether to leave him to starve or kill him outright. It did not matter much. Either way would have the same end.

He thought over the past weeks, not with a bitterness which he knew was unavailing, but with a slow, cool and calm denunciation of himself. He had waited too long, he had underestimated Turnbull, and all his self-restraint in the end had been for nothing. A thousand times he could have killed Turnbull, and had constrained himself to patience. It was his fault, that he sat now helpless, with Turnbull ready to go, to go down to Lovell with Threelegs' pelt, to tell some story or other of how Tremaine had been lost, or had shot himself accidentally, or had eaten poison by mistake.

And what had been his fundamental mistake, after all? Simply that he had failed to see the evil that lay in Turnbull. He had been over-confident always. He had been over-confident to the end when he had told Turnbull he would let him live to suffer the shame of his actions down in Lovell. He had failed to realize that no man with Turnbull's stubbornness and pride would willingly face the ruin of his reputation, accept the shame as a just punishment, any more than he had admitted his mistake about the rifle and a hundred other things. He looked back to their first meeting in the bar. It seemed impossible that three months could have worked such a change in men, could have brought them from partnership to murder. He had done his best, trying to stave off this end, hoping that patience and restraint would bring them out safely in the end. Well, it hadn't.

He looked at Turnbull with new eyes, seeing him now not as a man but as some kind of an animal. Hardly a wolf. Threelegs had had a certain kind of morality even in his worst aspects. Certainly not a dog whose whole nature was centered about loyalty. A coyote—a dirty, sneaking, slinking, carrion-eating scavenger, fit for nothing.

Turnbull's head jerked as they heard the hesitant clop of hooves behind the cabin, the low nicker of the horse. He looked at Tremaine and put down his fork, sidled toward the door, keeping the rifle on him.

Tremaine sat still until he had gone around the corner of the cabin. Then he got up and went over to the stove, picked out Turnbull's steak and dropped it in the fire. He put his hand inside his pocket and pulled out the slab of frozen bait.

By the time Turnbull came in after securing the horse, the meat was frying nicely. Tremaine watched him turn it over and sprinkle it with salt, coldly, silently, without thought or emotion.

He watched Turnbull sit down and cut into the meat without a qualm. Patiently he saw him slowly chew each morsel and swallow it, without compunction, without remorse, knowing there was need for none. He saw the fork fall from his hand, as the first paroxysm hit him, saw the brown eyes turn to him in horror.

"I found my dogs, Turnbull. There was a piece of bait left over."

Turnbull reached for the rifle. The second paroxysm hit him and he doubled up, fell writhing to the floor. Tremaine got up and went over to him, picked up the rifle and jacked out the cartridge.

He looked down at Turnbull with complete contempt. He was moaning and crying in an agony of fear. Tremaine went out and got a canful of water, poured most of it down his throat, and threw the rest of it in his face. Then he kicked him.

"Get up," he said. "It's not going to kill you. I'm not a murderer, Turnbull. You're going down and face the music as soon as you can sit on a horse. There wasn't enough poison in that bait to kill a cow, much less a dog. I scraped most of it out." He kicked him again. "Get on your feet and quit blubbering. I didn't even leave enough to kill a coyote. Just enough for a good-sized rat. Get on your feet and go."

Death To The Red-Coat Tyrant

By Dan Cushman

Red Coat protection for graft and murder??? Opinion was divided. But for certain the heavy stench of mutiny was fouling the clean, frozen air around the Mounted Police post of Fort McGrath . . . and not even sub-zero temperatures could cool that hot-headed band of suspicious Mounties.

GRAYNESS lay across the snow-covered parade ground at Fort McGrath, but little of it filtered through frosted barracks windows. Inside the barracks Sergeant Ford Haskett stood watching the two young constables play cribbage. He turned with an impatient jerk and strode to the door.

The hinges howled from cold as he jerked them free of ice-lock and looked across the clearing that fell in a series of little terraces to the level breadth of Rainy Lake.

After shivering a while, Constable Donnelly spoke, "That's nice fresh air, Sergeant."

Haskett came back, leaning his weight to force the door closed.

"Sorry."

Donnelly put down his cards to toss more wood in the stove.

"You've been like a penned carcajou ever since the Special Constable left to pick up that killer," Donnelly said.

Haskett smiled. The smile made his face look lopsided from the puckered scar on his right cheek where frost had bitten deeply five years before. Haskett was tall and lean. Thirty, but he looked more. The North country could put its mark on a man.

He said, "It's this damned waiting."

He knew both the constables had been watching him. They were new at Fort McGrath, but not so new they hadn't recognized the tension between Haskett and Acting-Inspector Philip Cromwell. The tension had existed since Cromwell first came in to report the ambush slaying of the old Inspector, and it had become especially marked since Cromwell had made that dog-driver, Jerges, a special-constable.

Corporal McCole entered from outside holding a rolled up bit of paper in one mitten, and paused to warm himself at the stove before taking off his mackinaw and parka. He was short and cheerful looking, with the sort of skin that tended to redden from snowglare, rather than turn mahogany like Haskett's.

"See anything?" Haskett asked.

McCole shook his head. "Jerges may have more trouble than he thinks." Then, grinning, "By the gods, Haskett, I think you're jealous that the Acting Inspector sent Jerges instead of you."

Neither of the constables would have said that to Haskett, but both of them laughed when McCole did. It seemed to break the tension holding Haskett, and he laughed too.

"Maybe I am. I'm not much used to hiding my feelings. You all know what I think of Jerges."

Jerges was a good driver and trail man despite a reputation for killing dogs, but he wasn't the sort generally chosen to serve with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. But Acting-Inspector Cromwell had appointed him, and then to make it worse, he'd sent him to Loon Bay, alone, to pick up Napoleon Belaire leaving two constables, a corporal and a sergeant to sit and spit at the stove, as the saying went. Napoleon Belaire was the trapper who'd supposedly ambushed Inspector Steffles a month before.

McCole carried the paper over and put it on the open record book. Then he stripped off his parka.

"For my part, he can leave me in barracks all winter." He hooked his thumb at the paper. "Thirty-six below and twelve miles of wind. That's no Chinook, soldiers!"

Feet creaked snow outside. The men fell silent, listening. Moccasins. The fact

they were moccasins seemed to bring relief. The hinges howled, and a squat, middle-aged Indian materialized from a billow of mist where cold struck the warm dampness of inside. It was Luksa, the Yellowknife dog keeper.

He padded to the stove and warmed himself all the way around waiting for a chance to speak with Haskett alone.

"New dogs plenty mean," he said in a flat, apparently half-interested tone.

Haskett's eyes narrowed. "What new dogs?" he asked softly.

"Don' know. Ol' squaw from big house bring down las' night. Five malemute. No savvy?"

"No savvy. What time?"

"Midnight maybe. Don' know. Injun don' read time."

There was no more said about it. The Indian borrowed a cigarette and smoked it in rapid puffs, tossing the butt away before going back outside. His clothes left a smoky, hamlike odor behind him.

HASKETT scraped a hole through window frost and looked out. The glass kept misting, and he kept warming it with the heel of his hand. His face in the crosslight of lamp and window looked lean and hard. After a few minutes he walked back to roll a cigarette. His fingers, twisting paper, trembled.

McCole said, "Generally the North country gets 'em the first year, not their tenth. Remember that winter up on Coronation Gulf when you kept dreaming of the pickles? Four months of twilight and a wind that never stopped. My God! What a place for a playboy like you."

Donnelly asked, "Did you really dream about pickles?"

Haskett nodded. The memory took his mind off Jerges and Napoleon Belaire for a moment. "Pickles. I don't know why I'd dream about pickles. I used to sit there in that cabin and think about nothing but pickles. Dream I was eating them from gallon crocks. Dill pickles, sweet pickles, sour pickles, olives . . . Once in a while I'd think about fresh tomatoes."

There was a sound outside and Haskett looked. Nothing. Just the snowy clearing and spruce timber gray in the long, morning twilight.

Constable Gray played a card and said, "Next year, maybe I go to Herschel Island."

"I was in Herschel for three years. Herschel's like Vancouver compared with Coronation Gulf. One year two whaling ships were frozen in. We even had dances."

"Squaws?"

"Sure, and one of the skippers had his wife and her sister." He looked at his watch. "No reason why Jerges couldn't have him here now."

"Know him very well?" Donnelly asked. "Napoleon Belaire, that is?"

"Sure I know old Nap. He's not the killer kind. Not the drygulching kind."

"You never can tell."

"Anybody can be a murderer. Anybody in this room—given the right circumstances. I've been policeman long enough to know that. But shooting from ambush . . . No, that long, cold one is something special. Old Napoleon didn't have it in him."

"But——" Constable Gray started, and stopped. He was going to say that Acting-Inspector Cromwell was an eye-witness. However, Haskett's remark had called him mistaken, and it was one of those things a man shouldn't follow up.

Time passed. There was a creak of boots in hard-packed snow, and the Acting-Inspector came in. He spoke with a sharp jerk of his head.

"Good morning!"

Cromwell was six-feet-one, built to excellent proportion—shoulders powerful and square, chest thick, legs with muscles that stretched the fabric of his blue trousers. He'd once been a commissioned officer in the regular army and the training was sharply revealed in his brittle attitude of command.

His face was hard and handsome, with middle-age just commencing to show in the gray along his temples. Despite the cold he wore a straight-brim felt hat rather than the fur caps which were customary in that northern district.

He stood for a moment, legs spread a little as though displaying their power, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the lamplit dimness. He looked at the card game without comment, inspected the floor, the uniforms. Finding everything in order he strode past Haskett and looked

down on the weather-report slip McCole had brought in.

"You haven't entered it?" he asked Haskett. Then, before Haskett could answer, "Having time on your hands is no reason to grow lax. I know that the former Inspector was prone to overlook these things but as long as I'm in charge here I'll insist on scrupulous care of all details. You have few enough duties—at least you can do them on time. Is that clear, Sergeant Haskett?"

"Yes sir!" Haskett met his eyes, jerking himself momentarily to attention as he spoke. Then he went on, "However, all the necessary information was not available before your arrival."

"So?" Cromwell stood with his legs spread wide, hands placed on his hips, looking down on the paper. "The weather information seems to be complete. What would I——"

"You're forgetting the record we keep of visitors."

The words seemed to strike Cromwell with physical force, causing him to flinch. He turned with a new, set hardness in his face.

"There are no visitors that I know of."

"Very well." Haskett sat down, dipped the pen, and carefully wrote the word, "None."

It would have ended there, but after a weighted silence Cromwell followed it up.

"What led you to believe I had a visitor in the big house?"

"There are five strange malemutes down in the pens."

Haskett dried the pen on a bit of wool felt and stood up. Cromwell's face had a set, belligerent quality with strong muscles showing at the sides of his jaw.

"Who said there were strange dogs here?"

"They've been fighting the police huskies all morning."

Cromwell grunted. "Luksa's Indian friends, probably." He let the matter drop.

No one mentioned the Indian's visit. No one said anything. The silence was strung out, second following second, broken only by the occasional snap of a hardwood knot in the stove.

Then there was something—a thin, singing vibration rising and descending like something half of the ears and half of the imagination.

Music.

Cromwell turned with a sharp movement, his weight creaking the cold-constricted boards he stood on.

It was a phonograph playing in the big house, the English gramaphone that Inspector Steffles' wife used to play before she died of cough and loneliness many years before.

A man's voice was audible, singing on the superficial old record—*"When you wore a tulip, a big yellow tulip . . ."*

Cromwell spoke to Haskett, his voice a hiss, his face looking hollow and big-boned from fury,

"Damn you! Get that smug look off your face!"

Haskett took his time in answering. When he did, his voice was calm, and the words were sharp and frigid as bits of ice,

"I'll ask you to be civil, Inspector."

Cromwell controlled himself with obvious effort. He took a deep breath, and the sound of it in his nostrils was the loudest thing in the big room.

"Oh, I know you haven't actually said anything. You've been much too subtle. You've said a great deal but you've never been straightforward enough to put any of it in words. I don't intend to tolerate——"

"And just what is it I've insinuated?"

"Very well, we might as well drag this into the open. Ever since I came back from Loon Bay and reported Inspector Steffles' murder, you've never missed an opportunity to insinuate I had something to do with it. You've staunchly upheld Napoleon Belaire's character, even though I myself saw him fire the ambush shot that killed the Inspector. You've done more. You've even indicated that I myself might have been guilty."

Haskett laughed. "I *am* a subtle fellow, aren't I?"

Cromwell's big form started forward. His fists were knotted, the muscles of his back and shoulders had tightened his uniform blouse. Then he checked himself.

"I'm your superior officer, do you understand that?"

"Believe me, you've made me quite aware of it."

"Say sir when you answer me."

"Yes sir!" said Haskett.

"You've been ten years in the service. You have a good record. But don't expect that horse to carry you too far. You'll give me the respect my rank deserves, or I'll have those stripes off your sleeves." He looked around. "And that goes for you, too, McCole. You hate my 'spit and polish' as you call it. You hate me because I disrupted the easy old routine that poor old Steffles tolerated."

He didn't name the real reason McCole hated him—because he'd ordered Constable Spangler to advance into rifle fire that was certain death that time they had the insane prospector cornered on the ice of the Sulphur Water three years before.

Cromwell buttoned his muskrat coat and went to the door with his old-time military stride.

For a moment the gramaphone sound came loudly through the open door. Then the door closed, shutting it out.

"I wonder what the hell's up there," McCole said.

II

THE SUN came up without heat sending its light across the vast, rolling country of spruce and snow. It hung for a while, apparently motionless along the horizon, then slid from view. That was all a winter day amounted to.

No more sound of gramaphone. Haskett went to the dog pens and looked at the five new malemutes. Dogs get to be known just like people are known in the far North, and there was one of these he recognized—a lank black and gray brute with a whip-scar making a streak along his left shoulder. He'd been up for sale at the dog auction two summers before at Victoria Bay.

A sled stood inside the wikiup shed. Cree-made, of birch with rawhide lacings and some extremely old Sheffield runners. It hadn't been there the day before.

He went back to the barracks. Darkness was coming by imperceptible degrees, making the kerosene lamp seem brighter.

Snowshoes squeaked outside. A voice called,

"Hello in there!"

McCole opened the door. A black-whiskered man was on one knee, untying the lashings of his short, Cree webs. Icicles had formed beneath his nostrils from long, hard breathing in the sharp cold.

He spoke, "Hello, McCole. I been on the lope clear from Trotteur Crossing." He loosed his moosehide mukluks and came inside, rubbing ice from his face with the back of one hand. "God! I'm not so young as I used to be. All hell's broke loose"

"What is it?" Haskett demanded.

"One o' your men. Bullet in the guts over on Trotteur. Bringing in old Nap Belaire. Jerges. I left—"

"Jerges killed?"

"No. He'll make it all right. Slug's down low somewheres. He's walkin' around. My pard, Riley Paxon, he's out there with him. We happened along right after the shootin' and helped Jerges corner old Nap on a hilltop. They'll keep him pinned down till you get out there."

Haskett tossed on mackinaw and parka, hurried to the big house.

It was a structure of massive logs and whipsawed plank sitting on a bench of the gently rising hillside. A porch, blown half full of snow, circled the front of the building.

Haskett jerked the babiche bell-pull and heard the tinkling response deep inside. After a long wait there was a shuffle of moccasins and Wapanook, the old Cree housekeeper, opened the door. She grunted something and backed up, letting him follow inside.

"Call Cromwell."

"Sure. Me call. Me call damn quick."

She left him in a big front room. There was a fireplace of massive granite blocks where foot-thick logs were crumbling to coal and ash A sweet fragrance hung in the air. A woman's perfume. None of your cheap synthetic stuff sold to squaws by the fur traders, but a subtle odor such as one might catch in a lounge of one of the Canadian Pacific's grand hotels.

One of the near doors opened and Cromwell strode out. He stopped midway in the big room and stood in his heavy, spread-legged way waiting for Haskett to speak.

Haskett briefly passed on his information.

Cromwell waited till he was through, and then spoke, scarcely moving his tight-

drawn lips, "No doubt you gain considerable satisfaction from passing this bit of news along."

"I don't believe my feelings have any significance."

Cromwell jerked his head with a bitter laugh. "I had to send that damned Jerges. No experience. But I had to send him! You know why? Because neither Gray nor Donnelly knew the country; and because neither you nor McCole were to be trusted. You both think Belaire innocent. You'd have given him warning if you could. And so I was forced—"

"Don't go too far, Cromwell."

"And if I do? Answer me!—What if I do go too far?"

"You're trying to force me into something that will get me bounced from the service, aren't you?"

Cromwell made a gesture showing he intended to carry the conversation no further.

"You and McCole come with me. You seem to know how these things should be done better than I, so you can have the privilege of capturing him. Tell Luksa to hitch the dogs. We may have to haul Jerges back."

The trail cut over the southeast arm of Rainy Lake and wound through patches of spruce for a dozen miles before descending to the broad valley of Trotteur Creek.

Haskett kept in the lead, keeping with Meyo-Muche the lead dog. McCole was on the gee-pole though no fresh snow had fallen on the broken trail and the lightly loaded police sled needed scarcely any guiding. Behind him came Cromwell looking unusually large in his tan canvas parka.

DURING their descent to Trotteur, a rifle shot resounded through the cold air.

No one spoke. A man doesn't talk and travel with the temperature near forty below.

Haskett collared Meyo-Muche, helping support him on the steep descent to the creek ice. Willows, gray and frozen brittle, grew in clumps with the trail winding among them. The willows ended, and the police outfit moved warily across a quarter-mile of park. By the bluish twilight

Sgt. Ford Haskett

of late evening, deep-furrowed trails could be seen circling the base of a hill.

They stopped. A man was walking through jackspruce timber, thigh-deep in snow.

"Jerges?" Cromwell asked.

"Yes."

"Where's your man?" There was a raw, whip-quality in Cromwell's voice.

Jerges stopped. He was medium in build, thirty or thirty five, quite ordinary except that his eyes were too small. He carried no rifle, but a revolver swung heavily across his front on a neck-thong.

"Damn it—"

"Say sir to me!"

"Damn it, sir, I thought old Nap was peaceful as a sheep dog. He just grabbed hold of my rifle. It could happen to anybody." He raised his voice defensively. "Damn it, I risked my life and got a bullet in me stoppin' him. That ought to be enough."

Cromwell regarded the man with uncontrolled contempt. "Well, where is he now?"

"Atop that hill yonder."

"You're sure?"

"He just shot at me."

"Where's the trapper?"

"Paxon? Yonder around the hill. But stay hid if you go circlin' around. Old Nap is pure pizen with that rifle."

They walked on, guided by Jerges, stopping at the base of a treeless sweep of hillside. Above, sharply revealed by starlight, were some rocks with a single, purple

line where a man's feet had furrowed through snow.

"Anyhow, he's there." Jerges muttered Cromwell moved into the open. "Be careful."

A rifle hammered as though jarred to explosion by sound of his voice. Powder made a momentary flash high among the rocks. The bullet fluttered the air close by and made a sharp, snapping sound as it winged through branches.

Cromwell dived forward to the concealment of deep snow, then he bellied back to timber. He stood, beating snow from his parka. Then he looked at Haskett and McCole.

"All right. Go up and get him."

Neither of them moved.

"Go up and get him! Or do you intend to disobey my command?"

"Yes sir," McCole said dryly. "We'll go up and get him."

McCole was first to leave the timber. He moved carefully, working belly down through deep snow. Haskett circled a few yards and crawled from a different angle.

It was safe enough for thirty or forty yards. Then the slope steepened, and wind had blown snow away until it scarcely covered the larger stones.

Haskett stopped, still flat to the ground, and shouted,

"Belaire! Napoleon Belaire, can you hear me?"

A voice came down from a hundred yards above, "I hear you, M'shu."

"This is Haskett. I'm coming up after you."

The man did not answer.

"You hear? I'm coming up there after you. You'd better give yourself up. Come peacefully and you'll get honest treatment."

"Come peacefully and be shot, "M'shu le Police?"

"I said you'd get honest treatment. You've known me for a long time, Belaire. Have I ever lied to you yet?"

There was a considerable interval of silence.

Then the man's voice, "It will not be Belaire who fire the firs' shot, M'shu."

Haskett stood up. Belaire could have killed him. Point-blank range, but there was no lash of flame and explosion from among the rocks. Haskett climbed slowly. At his left he could see McCole also on his feet. Down the slope, hidden by timber, Cromwell and Jerges waited.

He glimpsed movement among the rocks. Belaire. The man was going to come down and meet them half way. A rifle hammered from the timber below. Cromwell or Jerges. The bullet sang from rocks above. Instantly, Belaire was gone from view. He was firing from among the rocks. Four rapid shots.

Cromwell and Jerges were both shooting. The sharp report of a rifle mixed with the heavier thud of a revolver. A bullet fanned near Haskett as he stood and ran to the concealment of a shallow depression that angled up the hill.

He lay face down in a foot and a half of snow. All silent now. No sign of McCole. No sign of anyone.

He climbed on hands and knees. The crest wasn't far. Rocks rose in straight-faced blocks above him. The rocks that hid Belaire also gave concealment to Haskett.

Snow had settled waist-deep along their base. He stood, reached for a scrub pine that grew from a rock crevice, drew his body through the cold V of two stone surfaces. He paused, waited. A quarter minute passed. Deep shadows lay among the rocks. There was movement. A man coming that way. Belaire. Starlight fell on him.

A broad, heavy-set man of fortyfive dressed in plaid trousers and a buckskin parka. He was coming closer, rifle down, unaware of Haskett's presence.

"You're covered!" Haskett said.

Belaire spun around, trying to get the rifle in play. Haskett didn't give him time. He sprang, and his weight drove Belaire to the snow.

BELAIRE was thrust face down with Haskett pinning his arms. There were seconds of struggle, a silent contest of strength. No words. Only the quick pant of straining lungs. Then Belaire lay still.

Haskett said, "That was Cromwell shooting. You hear me? That was Cromwell. I had no idea he'd do it. I wasn't trying to doublecross you."

Belaire didn't answer. He lay still, side of his face pressed in snow. Haskett went on,

"Don't cause any more trouble, Belaire.

Stay with me. I'll see to it you get a fair trial despite Cromwell or anybody. If you're innocent the court will find you innocent."

"You believe that, M'shu?"

"Yes!"

"Ver' well. Always you have been hones' man. Napoleon Belaire believe what you say."

Haskett let him go. He stepped back. A rifle lay in trodden snow. Haskett picked it up. It was a 45-90 Winchester. Not one of the police guns. It was Jerges'.

Haskett retrieved his own gun and walked through the rocks on the side opposite to Cromwell and Jerges. The trapper would be here somewhere.

"Paxon!" he called.

A voice answered from timber. "I ain't shootin'."

Paxon, a spare, gray man came forward with a dragging motion on snowshoes. "Haskett? Yep, I thought it was you. Didn't one o' your lads get kilt on t'other side?"

"McCole?"

"Was it McCole? He went down like he was hit bad."

"I did not shoot heem!" Belaire cried, spinning around. "You try to make me killer—"

"Just take it easy. I said you'd get a fair deal."

The three men circled, hidden by timber. Cromwell and Jerges waited.

"So you brought him in alive," Cromwell said.

"Where's McCole?"

"Uphill." He seemed to take a grim pleasure in saying the words. "Uphill where that *innocent* prisoner of yours dropped him."

"You haven't gone up to look?"

"Are you presuming to reprimand me?" He barked the words, stiff-spined in his old military manner. "I do as I think best. I'm still issuing the orders. Do you understand that, Haskett?"

"I understand lots of things."

"Say what you mean!"

"You ordered McCole and me into the open and then opened fire on Belaire when he started to come out peacefully."

"Belaire fired first. I saved your life, you fool!"

Belaire cried, "It was not I who fire first. It was heem!"

STALKING THE SEAL

In the western Arctic, seals like to come out of their holes in the ice and lie in the sun. They can be stalked successfully if the hunter will remember two elementary facts about the seal's habits and mental processes: Since the ice is fairly level, he is bound to see you, so your only hope of approaching within range lies in pretending that you also are a seal. Up to a point 250 yards from the basking animal you can walk upright; then you must proceed on all fours until you are within 150 yards of the seal. After that you move only when he is asleep. When he wakes at the end of every 45, 60, or 75 seconds, and looks about for his natural enemy, the polar bear, you remain motionless.

The next time he takes a nap, you begin to crawl toward him, presenting a side view of your body so you will look like a seal. When you get within a hundred yards, he may become suspicious and continue to watch you, instead of dozing off for a minute or so. In that case, you cannot lie still for more than a couple of minutes or he will realize that you are not a seal, after all, and slide down into his hole.

So, after the seal has been watching you for half a minute, you raise your head about a foot, look about in seal fashion, then drop your head upon the ice. If he remains suspicious, it may even be necessary for you to roll about a little on the ice and to flex your legs as if you were scratching with your hind flippers. (Quite undignified, but also quite necessary to allay the seal's suspicions.)

Two or three surveys of the horizon and a little scratching will convince the seal that you, too, are bothered with lice, like all other seals. You can then proceed to crawl toward him while he sleeps, and stop while he remains awake, until you are close enough for a brain shot.

"I know quite well who it was," Haskett said.

Cromwell was rigid, rifle held in his bare right hand. He started to bring the barrel to aim. Paxon said something. His voice stopped Cromwell. His being witness probably saved Haskett's life. Cromwell had checked himself with the muzzle a few degrees to one side. He drew a deep breath.

"Watch your tongue," he hissed. "Do you want such a lie to disgrace the police throughout the district?"

"It was deliberate murder. It might as well be made public now as later. It'll come out sometime. It always does. You wanted to get rid of McCole and myself,

and it looked like a fine idea to force poor old Belaire into doing it."

His words snapped the control Cromwell still held over himself. He cursed and lunged forward, swinging the rifle barrel. Haskett tried to weave, but snow held him. He moved only enough to make the rifle miss his skull. It struck across neck and shoulder, driving him down.

He sensed the steel-shod butt coming for his skull.

Paxon shouted something.

The voice cut through Cromwell's rage. He controlled himself.

"All right." His voice seemed to shake a little. He nudged Haskett with his boot. "Get up." Then he bellowed, "Get up!"

Paxon was on one knee, helping Haskett to a sitting position. Haskett staggered to his feet. Cromwell took a step back, watching, the rifle ready in his hands.

Haskett looked at him and turned away. He waded thigh-deep through snow until he reached the spot where McCole had fallen.

He was face down with his blood making little, dark dribbles of ice cross the snow.

Haskett knelt beside him. The man was dead. The bullet had struck on the right side passing all the way through. No way of knowing from which direction it had come.

III

THE RETURN trip was slower with the dead man weighting the sled.

A light burned in an upstairs room of the big house. The room had been Mrs. Steffles', and in the years since her death this was the first time Haskett could remember a light in it.

Cromwell left them, and Haskett took his prisoner to the jail of heavy logs which adjoined the barracks. It was cold, with a shut-up smell of disinfectant.

Corporal Donnelly was there to open the first cell with a master key. He swung open the heavy plank and iron door letting Belaire walk inside.

"Better start a fire," Haskett said in his tight, hard voice. "It must be zero in here."

"Right away."

A spruce-pole bed covered by gray wool blankets stood at one side of the cell. Belaire walked over and sat down. Out in the hall, Donnelly could be heard splitting kindling.

Haskett spoke, "You're a religious man, Belaire."

"Yes, M'shu."

"You'll tell the truth then. Was it you who killed McCole tonight?"

"Of course I did not. I did not fire firs'—"

"I know that. I saw the gun flashes."

"I only fired back. I aimed at those men in the timber."

"How about Inspector Steffles? Did you ambush him?"

"I will plead guilty to hees death, Monsieur."

The words jolted Haskett. He stood a few seconds, face looking unusually thin and hard in oblique light from the kerosene lamp.

"You killed Steffles?"

"It is as I said. I plead guilty to hees murder."

"Why the devil did you do it?"

Belaire lifted his shoulders and let them fall. "What should I say? Should I say I was angry? Angry that he took away my trapping rights along the north side of Loon Bay? When one is blind from anger—"

"He was shot from ambush. You'd have had time to get over your blind anger in the hours you must have waited for him."

"It is said. It is done. I talk of it no more. I plead guilty of murder. And now I would have the commander hear my confession, M'shu."

"It won't be necessaary. I'll write it out and have—"

"I demand to see your commander!"

"Why?"

"The reason is my own."

"All right, I'll bring him down."

Haskett went outside. Lantern light showed in the door of the high-stilted cache house where Gray and the two trappers were putting McCole's body. He walked past, crossed the porch of the big house, j e r k e d the bell-pull. He heard someone's voice, opened the door, stepped inside.

A kerosene mantle lamp burned in a suspended chandelier. Someone was standing midway on the stairs, looking down at him. A girl.

He walked forward. She was small, delicate, lovely. No older than twenty. Her lips were parted slightly, showing small, extremely white teeth. She wore a wool blouse, a skirt of fringed buckskin, high moccasins with dyed quill and beadwork that was a miracle of delicacy. But what he noticed chiefly was her hair. It fell in dark masses, in ringlets submerging her small shoulders.

He felt that he had seen her before. Somewhere, in a place not associated with Rainy Lake, perhaps years before.

"Hello," he said, taking off his cap.

"M'shu." She moved slightly as though to courtsy in the old-fashioned manner. Her voice had a deep, dulcet quality. Sound of it created a responding vibration deep, and they had a softness like marten former meeting was stronger than before.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I cannot say, M'shu."

"Why?"

She did not answer.

"Did you come about Belaire?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were deep, and they had a softness like martin fur. A sound broke the spell. Haskett turned sharply and saw Cromwell standing in the door of the library.

"What are you doing in this house?" Cromwell barked.

Haskett started to explain it was a mistake, that he thought someone had called telling him to come in. It seemed too much like an apology. He merely stood there jaw hard, looking Cromwell in the eye. With soft, hurrying feet, the girl disappeared upstairs. He could hear a door close and a wooden bar thud into place.

"Well?" Cromwell asked. "What do you want?"

"Our prisoner has confessed."

The words seemed to stun Cromwell for a moment. It was not usual for him to show his emotions, but this time his face turned grayish under its snow-tan and little spots of color rode on his cheekbones. He'd doubled his fists, and the muscles of his shoulders tightened his uniform blouse.

"Confessed. What kind of a joke do you—"

"It's no joke. He confessed to ambushing Steffles. He wants to see you."

"What would he need to see me about?"

"He won't say. It's merely that he demands you hear his confession."

CROMWELL was thinking it over. The old gaunt and savage expression had returned to his face. He started to say something, changed his mind, and muttered instead,

"I'll see him when I get the time."

"Tonight?"

"No."

Haskett strode back to the door. He paused with his hand on the latch and let his eyes travel up the stairs. No one there. It was hard to believe there had ever been anyone there.

"You're wondering about the girl, aren't you?" Cromwell asked.

"Yes."

"Do you recognize her?" He was watching Haskett's face closely.

"No."

"She's my wife."

"Congratulations."

"You evidently don't believe me."

"I don't think you expected me to believe you."

Haskett let himself outside. Heat of the house seemed to leave him a trifle dizzy. Cold air helped. Cromwell had been lying. The girl wasn't his wife. The idea of her being there in the house with him was like a dull knife thrust in Haskett's guts.

They were still working inside the cache house. McCole had been one of the best friends Haskett had on the force. He was glad somebody else had the job of putting him away. He walked to the barracks,

Jerges was playing solitaire. Haskett walked past him and entered the cell block. Fire was dulling the edge of cold.

"He wouldn't come," Haskett said to Napoleon Belaire.

"M'shu! I mus' see heem."

"Tomorrow morning maybe."

"Not tomorrow, M'shu. You promise—"

"Why's it so damned important for you to see him tonight?"

Belaire did not answer. He grabbed the door and tried to jerk it open.

"What's up, Belaire?"

The man didn't answer.

"No one heard your confession, you

know. You can plead anything you want when we get you down to Edmonton."

"I am guilty!"

"Who's that girl up at the big house?"

"How would I know?" Haskett turned to leave. "You will tell that girl I confess, M'shu! You will tell that girl and you will tell Cromwell that I confess!"

"All right."

He went back to the big barracks room. Jerges was still shuffling through his solitaire deck. Haskett looked down on him for a moment.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"What you talkin' about?"

"You know damned well what I'm talking about."

Jerges laid down the deck and leaned back in his chair. He pulled back one upper lip revealing tobacco-yellowed teeth. "Don't stand lookin' at me. If you want to know who she is, go up and find our from Cromwell. Or are you scared of him?"

"I asked who she was."

"Don't try to bluff me, mountie. I'm part of the force, too, remember. I'm no common dog driver any—"

Haskett's hand shot out with unexpected swiftness, seizing him by the collar of his shirt. With a powerful movement he dragged Jerges forward across the table.

"Who is she?"

Jerges ripped back and forth, trying to free himself. Haskett's hand twisted more tightly, shutting off his breath. His face was getting purplish.

"I asked who she was."

Jerges rammed the table aside. He was on the floor with one knee, hands tearing at Haskett's fingers. Haskett released the pressure a little.

Jerges gasped, "She's—his wife."

"Tell me her name."

"Marie. Marie—Belaire."

"She was out there at Loon Bay when you arrested old Nap, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

Jerges was looking up, fingers dug under his collar, greasy hair stringing in his eyes. He looked like a whipped malemute.

"Why did Belaire try to escape?"

"What do you mean?"

"Cromwell told you to get him and see to it he was killed trying to escape. But you messed it up and he got your gun."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

Haskett let him go. His hands felt dirty from contact with the fellow. He went back outside. The light was still burning upstairs in the cache house. It was a squared log structure standing on four piles, the piles covered with flattened tin cans to defeat the claws of marauding skunks and wolverines. A ladder led to the door. He climbed it. Constable Gray and the two trappers had carried McCole's body to one side and covered it with a blanket.

NONE of the men spoke as Haskett entered and walked across, stooping a little from the low roof. He drew the blanket away from McCole's body. It was already frozen stiff from the strong cold.

Haskett lifted the parka and used his Hudson's Bay knife to cut away chunks of blood-caked, frozen shirt. The bullet had struck between ribs on the right side and gone through, glancing from his spine. Evidently the bullet hadn't deformed a great deal. There was no way of being certain, but that big 45-90 lever action Winchester Belaire had taken from Jerges would have made a lot bigger wound.

"You'd better have Luksa build a box," Haskett said.

Gray nodded. "He'll be all right for tonight?"

"Lock the door."

Haskett went down the ladder. A light was still burning in the upstairs room—Mrs. Steffles' room. No blinds, but a thick florescence of frost gave it a transluscent quality. A shadow lay for a moment against the window. His pulse quickened as he recognized the girl. Maria Belaire.

"Coming?" Gray asked, stopping beside him.

"I'll stand around for a while."

Gray walked toward the barracks with the two trappers following. Haskett let them get out of sight. He wanted to pay another visit to the big house. He wanted to take a look at that bolt action rifle Cromwell had been carrying.

He went uphill, circled, following the squaw housekeeper's path to the rear door. The door opened with a slight whine of frozen hinges. Dark inside. He waited,

getting the snow-flicker out of his eyeballs. After half a minute the general outlines of a hall became visible.

There were some rough-plank stairs leading to the second story. It was a temptation to go directly up there and find the girl. Instead he followed a hall to the big, front room. The lamp was out, but fresh logs had been stacked in the fireplace and flames rolled high, lighting the floor but leaving masses of uncertain, dancing shadows along the walls.

Cromwell was evidently still in his office. Light glowed in a strip beneath its door. The Enfield rifle was there, leaning against the wall. Haskett picked it up, operated the bolt. A cartridge popped out. He caught it before it could strike the floor.

Cromwell was moving around inside the office. He was a heavy man, and his weight brought squeaks from the plank floor. Haskett stood quietly, holding the cartridge. The man didn't come out.

He turned the cartridge in his hand. It was bronze-pointed, bearing the stamp of an American manufacturer. Nothing proved. A bronze point is an expanding bullet highly temperamental in its action. While one may drive through a man cleanly as a steel jacket, the next may mushroom, or even shatter to jagged fragments. No way of telling which rifle had pointed death at McCole.

He slid the cartridge back in the magazine, retraced his path across the big room, climbed the stairs. There was a wide upstairs hall with four doors leading off it. Three of them were roughplank, the other stained and varnished mahogany. That was the door to Mrs. Steffles' old room.

No light beneath it. The girl had evidently blown the candle out since his entrance. He stood close, listened. All he could hear was the distant snap of logs in the fireplace downstairs.

He rapped. There was an instant movement in answer. A whisper of footsteps, then her voice—

"Yes?"

She spoke from just beyond the panels.

"It's Sergeant Haskett."

Her quick, relieved inhalation of breath came to his ears. It was evident she'd expected it to be someone else.

"What do you want?"

Suicide Trail

In 1898 it took the hardiest prospectors four weeks to cross the thirty-seven mile Chilkoot Pass. In the rush to Yellowknife, in the North West Territories, forty years later some of the same prospectors made the trip from Edmonton in six hours by plane and, at the end of the trip, found porters to carry their baggage into the bush. In the rush of '98, out of the hundreds and hundreds who left Edmonton to take an overland route to the Klondike, hardly a man reached the gold fields. The hardships were so incredible that they broke the mind as well as the body, and the route was soon known as Suicide Trail.

"I wanted to tell you that your father had just confessed."

Eight or ten seconds went by. It seemed longer. Then came the scraping sound of a bar, and the door swung open.

IV

A SLIGHT glow of starlight made silvery etchings on the window, and she was silhouetted against it. She came close. He was conscious of her eyes looking up at him. She seemed smaller than she had back on the stairs. Like a child.

"He confess?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"What kind of a trick is thees, M'shu?"

"It's no trick. None of my playing, anyway. He confessed to ambushing Inspector Steffles. I heard him. Then he insisted that I come here immediately to tell you. I entered by the back door to avoid Cromwell."

She took a step forward. Her hand reached for the front of his mackinaw. He was conscious of its warmth and smoothness. A man gets to forgetting what a woman is like after spending too many years in that raw North country.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She was still looking up at him. He didn't know whether she'd even heard his question. Her hand fumbled with his shirt. The fresh, pine and wind fragrance of her hair came to his nostrils. In the dark she seemed half real and half of the imagination.

"Answer me."

"M'shu!"

She merely said the one word. Its tone was a plea for him to ask nothing more.

"You can't trust Cromwell. You can't believe anything he promises."

"I do not trust him." Then she surprised him by saying, "It has been so long. I thought you had forgotten me, M'shu."

His original impression had been correct.

He had seen her before. He still couldn't remember where or when. She went on:

"You thought of me only as little girl that day of the dog auction in Resolution."

It came back to him then. The girl had been among the men, standing beside the platform while the auctioneer shouted his mixture of French, English and Cree, but she had not been listening—she'd been watching Haskett with her soft, dark eyes. He thought she'd been fascinated more by his uniform than himself.

She said, "I thought you were ver' hand some."

"You liked the color of my uniform."

"I *hate* the color of your uniform!"

She was French, and she had the old French distrust of the red-coated policemen. They had been a symbol of oppression to French-Catholic France ever since the day Louis Riel had died on the scaffold.

He didn't argue with her. He merely stood as he'd been, feeling the warm touch of her hands against his chest. Although her face was scant inches away, only its vague outline was visible by the starlight filtering through the frosted window.

He said, "You still haven't told me why you're here."

"It makes some difference to you?"

"Of course it makes a difference. Do you know what Cromwell said? That you were his wife."

He waited for her answer, and every second that ticked by was like a knife thrust more deeply inside his vitals.

"Answer me!"

"He—lies."

"Tell me the truth of what happened."

"What do you mean?"

"Your father didn't murder Inspector Steffles!"

"Of course not. My father never kill any man. If he confess—I do not know why."

"What was that quarrel concerning the trapping rights along Loon Bay?"

"They quarrel, it is true. He wanted five hundred dollars for the rights my family had these fifty years for nothing. Papa would not pay. He say—"

"Steffles tried to *sell* your father the trapping rights?"

"That is what Cromwell say. Five hundred dollars. He send first the man Jerges. Then when we do not pay, Cromwell come himself. That was first time I see Cromwell."

It seemed hot in the hall. His throat was dry. The girl started to say something—stopped. They listened. Logs could still be heard crackling in the big fireplace downstairs. Nothing else. She was so close he could feel the quick rise and fall of her breast.

A CREAK came from the stairs. It was the sort of noise a heavy man might make in changing position.

Haskett started, but she was holding him. Her hands, clutching the front of his mackinaw, were unexpectedly strong.

"No, M'shu. He would kill you if—"

"I can take care of myself."

"Wait."

They listened a while longer. The sound was not repeated. It might have been nothing after all. Boards often made such sounds due to contraction in the strong cold.

He said, "You'd better go back to your room."

She let him guide her back through the door. He hated the thought of leaving her there. He drew his revolver from its scabbard.

"You'd better take this."

"I already have a pistol, M'shu."

"Does Cromwell want to marry you?"

"Yes."

"Then I think I know why you're here, and I know why your father confessed."

"I had to come."

"You're not doing him any good now. You'd better get ready to leave. I'll be back for you."

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

He waited until the bar thumped into

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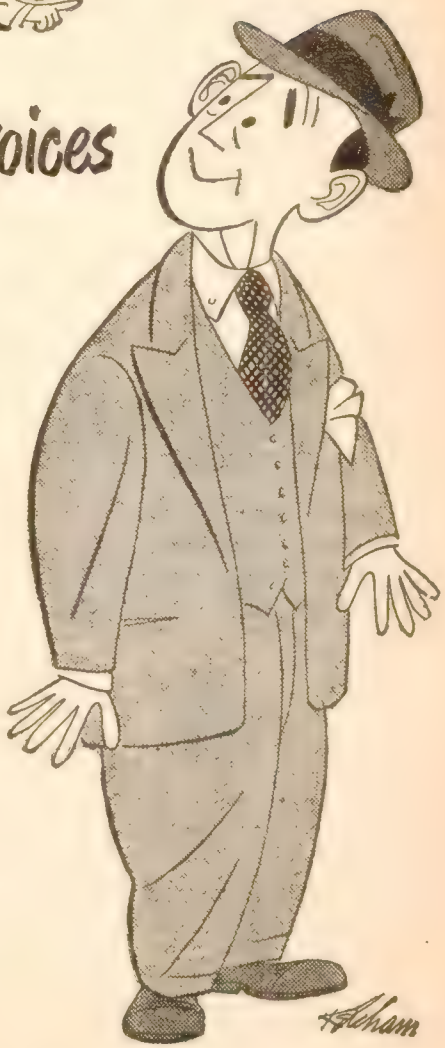

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place, locking her door. He started down the hall. He drew up, sensing movement in the darkness.

Cromwell's voice from the head of the stairs, "Stop."

He spoke in a harsh whisper, forming the word just back of his teeth.

"I have a gun, Haskett."

Haskett had already seen its bluish glimmer. "What do you plan on doing with it?"

"Kill you, if you cause the least trouble."

Haskett stood where he was, waiting to see what Cromwell would do next.

"Downstairs!"

Haskett walked past him. He went downstairs with Cromwell staying a step or two behind.

In the big room, Haskett said, "You can put the gun away. I don't intend to fight you."

Cromwell rammed it back in its holster. There was challenge in his action. Both men were armed. Alone together. He was not a coward. He stood with hands on hips, eyes narrow, lips drawn to a savage thinness.

"It's coming to a showdown, isn't it?"

Haskett shrugged. He wanted to hear any information Cromwell was willing to volunteer, so he waited.

Cromwell said, "I doubt that it would be advisable for you to stay here at Fort McGrath any longer. I'm in command here now, and I intend to stay in command. It wouldn't look too well for me to have an open fight with an old member of the force like yourself. So there's only one answer to the situation. You'll have to leave.

"Where are you sending me?"

"I haven't quite decided."

Haskett's mind had no trouble grasping this new turn. The man wanted him out of the way so he could have his way with Belaire and his daughter. Haskett said,

"It's only fair to warn you that I'll go to the Commissioner at my first opportunity. And when I do, I'll tell him exactly how things stand here at McGrath."

"That's your privilege," Cromwell said through his teeth. He teetered to the toes of his polished boots and down again, an action he liked because it accentuated the power of his legs. "Just what do you intend to tell the Commissioner about me? That I named an undesirable dog-driver as Special Constable? That I entertained my wife—"

"She's not your wife, and I'll probably make no mention of her."

"What *are* you going to report?" he barked.

"For one thing, I'll let him know you've been taking money for trapping rights along Loon Bay, further that an argument over that particular piece of graft resulted in the death of the Inspector."

Cromwell jerked out a laugh. He kept teetering up and down on the toes of his polished boots. Spots of color had appeared high on his cheekbones.

"Maybe you'll count on the word of a confessed killer to make that lie stick." He became thoughtful, pacing the room and coming back to his old place by the fire again. "On the other hand, maybe I shouldn't send you away after all. What *you* know, and what *I* know will never bother the Commissioner's sleep as long as that great white barrier lies between us. That thousand miles of snow makes me ruler north of the Athabasca."

"It works both ways—that white barrier of yours."

"Threatening me?"

"Take it any way you want."

He waited for Cromwell to say some more, but the man merely stood the same as before, teetering up and back on his boot toes, watching with fierce, narrowed eyes.

"May I leave?" Haskett asked after the military manner.

"You came without my permission, didn't you?"

He went outside. Cold air always helped him think things through. Cromwell would not send him away from the post—not now with that information about taking money for trapping rights. Such a thing, if proved, would drive him in disgrace from the R. C. M. P., and if no more than suspected, would interfere with his advancement. Cromwell would keep him there, and perhaps find some means of killing him, just as he had killed McCole.

There was a light burning in the barracks but instead of going there directly, Haskett walked downhill to the dog pens. Luksa was in his shanty, sleeping on the floor in a bear-skin bed. Haskett roused

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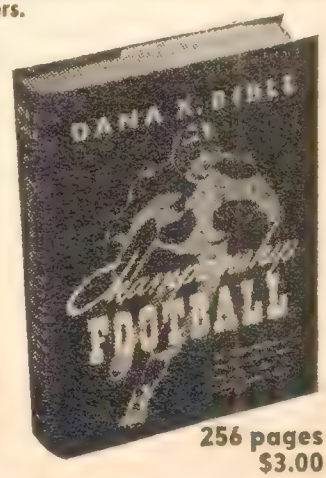

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him, ordering him to hitch the new dogs and keep them out of sight. He then went up to the barracks.

He'd wait there an hour before trying to get the girl away. With her gone he'd feel more free to move.

Donnelly was sitting at the table.

"Haskett!"

"Yes?"

"What the devil is going on around here, anyhow?"

Haskett shook his head. He couldn't take the man into his confidence, much as he'd have liked to.

Donnelly went on, "Excuse me for opening my mouth where I have no business but you're likely to get into lots of trouble fighting with your superior officer."

Haskett stopped at the door leading to his quarters. "That was a warning as to how you'll stand in case of a showdown?"

"I think it's only fair."

"Thanks."

He said it sincerely and without rancor. He couldn't blame Donnelly. A man may have his own ideas about right and wrong but as long as he's with the Mounted he takes orders from his superior.

V

HASKETT lay down in the darkness of his room. His brain buzzed from fatigue but he managed to stay awake. His watch lay on a chair beside the bed. He could hear its ringing tick-tick as the seconds of night were counted away.

An hour passed. He was thinking of Marie Belaire. Her malemutes would be hitched and waiting. A few more minutes and he would go to the big house after her . . .

He heard the barracks door open and close. A heavy sound of boots. Cromwell. He cursed and sat up.

"Haskett!" the man called.

"In a moment."

He lighted the lamp, took time to straighten his shirt and blouse, comb his hair.

Such things got to be a habit in the service. He opened the door and stood briefly at attention. Cromwell turned and faced him with a curt nod. More than ever tonight his manner was military. "Where are Constables Gray and Donnelly?"

"In bed, I suppose."

"Send for them."

There was no one to send. Haskett went himself. In five minutes they were dressed and waiting in the big room.

Cromwell spoke, "I've thought it over and decided it was highly advisable to remove Belaire immediately. Haskett, I'm sending you to Athabasca with him. Gray, go down to the pens and have Luksa harness the police team."

Haskett's face showed no surprise though he'd never expected Cromwell to send him away that he might carry that damaging story about the sale of trapping privileges. There must be something beneath it. He thought of Marie. She would be waiting for him at the big house. He wondered if Cromwell knew that.

Haskett asked, "Do you consider Belaire a dangerous prisoner?"

"It'll do you no good to argue with me about this thing. I've taken all I intend to from you. I think it will be best if there are a few hundred miles of snow between us. It's for your own good that I'm sending you rather than Donnelly. You leave tonight with your prisoner. That's a command and it requires no discussion." His lips peeled back showing his strong teeth in a smile. "Unless you have it in your mind to disobey."

"That would please you, wouldn't it?"

Haskett went to his room, made a bundle consisting of wool sox and underwear, extra moccasins, his down-filled sleeping bag. From the supply room he secured an extra sleeping bag, a trail kit, supplies of bacon, dried beans, tea, self-rising flour. He made two loads of it, carrying it outside.

Cromwell stood with back to the stove, watching him. He spoke in close-clipped sentences, "The post is due from Chipewayan in ten days. Leave a report on your progress. See that it carries the Chipewayan stamp. I'll expect another message advising me when you arrive at Athabasca Landing. The commissioner there will understand my reluctance to keep Belaire at McGrath during the cold months. I'll expect you to have the prisoner sign a formal confession there. Afterward you will consider yourself subject

to the commissioner's orders. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

Acting-Inspector Cromwell seated himself in a straight-backed chair. Gray came up from the dog pens.

"Hitched?"

"Luksa's doing it."

"This floor's a disgrace."

Gray went to work with broom and pan, gathering fragments that had fallen from the ash-hopper.

"You'll take care of the weather reports and supervise the pens. Donnelly will have charge of quarters. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

There followed a few minutes of uncomfortable silence. Donnelly led Belaire in from the prison wing, handcuffed, wearing his squaw-tanned parka.

Belaire saw Cromwell sitting beside the stove. "M'shu le Commander! You have heard?——I confess. Now——"

"We'll discuss it at the proper time."

"But M'shu——"

"Later."

"Ver' well. Where are you now taking me?"

"To a safer place."

Huskies could be heard barking as they made the short run up from the pens. There was a jungle of leader's bells, a creak of steel runners. Cromwell walked to the door. Luksa was on one knee, fixing one of the collar snaps.

"Plenty feed?" Cromwell asked.

"Plenty feed."

Haskett came from his room dressed for the trail carrying a leather portfolio under his arm.

"You haven't signed the order," he said.

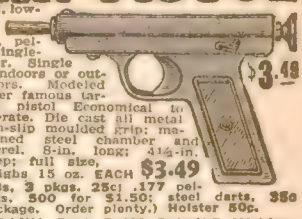
Cromwell went to the desk and wrote it out with swift, hard pen strokes that spattered ink but made a solid, purple carbon copy beneath. He put the carbon copy inside his blouse pocket handing Haskett the original.

"Congratulations, Haskett. I'd expected more rebellion."

Haskett walked to the door. He didn't bother to answer.

The police huskies ran hard for the first half-mile and then settled down to the steady pull across the snow-covered ice of Rainy Lake.

3 In 1 AIR PISTOL



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IT seemed to take Napoleon Belaire that long to realize he was being taken somewhere far from Fort McGrath. He stopped abruptly and swung around, lifting his mittened, manacled hands.

"Where you tak me, M'shu?"

"To Athabasca Landing."

He cursed in French. "Is trick! You tak me——"

"Maybe it is a trick. I have my orders."

"You would obey an unjust order?"

It was a question that lots of men in military-type organizations such as the R. C. M. P. have had to answer for themselves at one time or other.

"No one forced me to enlist in the Mounted," Haskett said bitterly. "I knew what I was getting into."

"But you cannot tak me away from Fort McGrath! My daughter, she is up at big house——"

"I know it. And now maybe you'll tell me what she hopes to accomplish."

"Your policeman, he came for me. Jerges. He threaten me long tam I will be arrested. Then he come, but she beat us by short-cut through bush. Perhaps she try tell Cromwell I am not guilty. Perhaps——"

"Talk straight. What do you mean Jerges threatened you a long time ago with arrest?"

"I tell. Everything. I did not kill Inspector Steffles. It is true I quarrel with Cromwell. It is true I threaten Steffles. But I do not kill heem. Cromwell, he come 'round say I mus' pay five hundred dollar for trapping rights along Loon Bay.

"Then he say perhaps if Marie she smile a lin' bit the cost will be nothing. So. I drive heem away with gun. He claim Steffles, le Inspector, demand thees money. I do not know. I write letter to Steffles. The next I hear, M'shu le Inspector Steffles, he is shot from bushwhack. Then come thees swine, Jerges, he threaten me with arrest. If Marie does not smile on Cromwell. You understand?"

"I understand."

"So he come tak me away. I do not know Marie has gone see Cromwell until las' evening at Trotteur crossing. So I confess to murder. You see why, M'shu? If I confess, then the worst has happen and nothing Marie can do will save me. I am beyond favor from Cromwell, from everyone except your damn English judge. You know what I am saying?"

"Sure I know what you're saying."

"And now thees swine, thees Cromwell. He send me away so Marie will not know I confess. How do we know what he will tell my Marie?"

"I told her you confessed."

Belaire seized Haskett's mitten with both hands. "M'shu! Then you believe me. You will not tak me away——"

"You heard my orders."

Belaire stood back, digesting the fact. All his life he'd gone the wild, free way of a woodsman, and it was hard for such a one to realize the unrelenting fact of authority.

Belaire said, "Someday there come a day when even the coward malemute turn on hees master."

"I'm sorry, Belaire. I know what you think of me. I know what I think of myself." He looked a lot older than his thirty years at that moment. His face was gaunt, and the puckery frost-scar was sharply revealed in the bright, Northern starlight. He grabbed the sled handles and rocked the runners from their set. "Mush!" he cried.

For miles the lights of Fort McGrath could be seen shining across the level lake ice. Then the trail went ashore, climbing the steep bluffs.

McGrath paused to breathe the huskies. It was a steep climb along the bluff trail. The animals lay in their tracks, fluffy tails covering their feet. Frost already silvered the fur at the sides of their mouths.

Haskett went ahead a few steps, scanning the country. He still did not believe Cromwell intended letting him get to Athabasca Landing alive.

He went back. Belaire was still handcuffed. He unlocked the cuffs and slid them beneath his belt. Belaire thanked him. The dogs were on their feet. It took Haskett a moment to get them pulling evenly, drawing up the steep bluff trail.

Belaire went ahead, collaring the lead dog, helping him up steep pitches. Haskett stayed with the gee-pole, guiding the

sled, sometimes holding it upright as it circled the steeper bluff faces.

The lead dog jerked at an off-angle and barked. In the police business, a man gets so he understands such warnings. Haskett sprang forward, reached for the rifle.

A bullet whipped close, cutting a wave of snow a dozen yards beyond. Close after came the brittle crack of explosion.

Haskett continued his forward movement, diving face foremost into deep snow.

For a second he was behind the sled. The dogs kept going, leaving him. Snowshoes tangled him. He kicked free of their lashings.

He lay there, hidden for the moment. Someone was in the thick timber along the bluff crest. Haskett hadn't seen the flame of the rifle, so he had only a general idea of the bushwhacker's position.

He moved carefully, lay on his side, drew the rifle from its fur-lined scabbard. He bellied around, rested on elbows. He was so deep all he could see was snow and sky.

He raised little by little, poking the rifle ahead of him. The ambusher caught his movement, and a second bullet whipped in, kicking snow in his face.

A streak of flame looked bright in spruce shadow. Haskett was waiting for it. The front sight beaded, his finger squeezed the trigger.

A man leaped up, momentarily visible, dived from sight. Jerges. He wasn't hit. He'd turned yellow after his bushwhack bullets had missed.

There was movement of spruce branches. Haskett fired again, again. Blind shots, but close enough to keep Jerges moving.

Haskett got to his feet, waded snow until timber hid him. He sank to his thighs, but kept going. A five minute climb to the summit. The snow there was furrowed; showing where the man had waited. A snowshoe trail. It swung down the other side, made a line that his eye could follow, seemed headed toward Fort McGrath.

Haskett went back and found Belaire crouched behind the sled hamper.

"He would kill you, M'shu? Jerges. A policeman like you?"

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"He's a policeman but not like me. That's why Cromwell started us out. So we'd walk into Jerges' ambush."

Haskett drew his revolver, thrust it in the man's hands. Belaire stared down at the heavy gun. "What will we do?"

"We're going back to Fort McGrath."

"But your commander!" The Frenchman was grinning, showing his strong teeth. "You have forgotten the authority of le police? The regulations. The sacred regulations?"

"To hell with the regulations. And if it comes down to it, to hell with the police, too!"

"Ha! Now you talk lak the man!"

VI

HASKETT swung the dogs around but he did not immediately guide them to the lake ice. There were too many wooded narrows to hide an ambusher. Instead he broke new trail around the shore and struck Jerges' snowshoe tracks.

The steps were longer than average, and snow was kicked in little swirls on each side showing that the man was traveling fast.

Haskett stood up. His face was grim. "I didn't think he'd have the guts to go back and tell Cromwell he'd bungled his bushwhack job."

Jerges had an eight or ten minute start. It would still be possible to catch him.

Haskett moved with a long, swinging stride following the man's tracks through timber, then across the wide stretch of lake ice.

Wind had blown hard, packing the snow. Dawn grayness was mixing with starlight. Two or three miles away he could see a moving shape.

"Jerges?" Belaire asked.

"Yes."

"We'll never catch heem."

Haskett made no comment. He needed his breath. The buildings of Fort McGrath stood on rising ground, misty from woodsmoke.

Jerges climbed the bank and disappeared beyond the dog shed. It was another five minutes before Haskett and Belaire arrived.

Luksa shuffled out, looking at them.

"Jerges. Did he go to the big house?"

"No. Him go barracks."

"Still there?"

"Don' know."

Haskett hurried up the slight rise of the old parade ground. Someone had lighted a lamp inside the barracks.

He opened the door and stood for a moment with rifle slung across the bend of his left arm. It wasn't pointed. It was merely there, ready. Gray came in sight, sleepy and half dressed.

"Jerges here?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

Gray hesitated. "Went up to the house. Claimed you turned your prisoner loose and tried to kill him. Tried to kill Jerges, that is . . ."

Gray was staring past Haskett at Belaire, at the man's unmanacled hands, at the revolver strapped around the waist of his parka.

Haskett——"Where's Donnelly?"

"Thees heem now!" Belaire muttered, backing to the wall just outside the door.

Donnelly had been to the big house. He was crossing the parade ground looking grim and a little frightened.

Haskett went outside. He let a hard laugh jerk his shoulders. "Don't say it, youngster! The chief has ordered you to place me under arrest."

"Why don't you go for your gun?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary."

"The hell it won't. The chief is a murderer and a grafter. He's just about through with the Mounted. He's not going to arrest me or have me arrested. I'm going up there and arrest him."

Donnelly's jaw had a jut to it. His hand rested on the butt of his service pistol. Despite the cold, perspiration caught the morning light as it streaked down from beneath his fur cap.

"You're under arrest, Haskett."

"Don't be a fool."

Donnelly raised his voice and almost screamed, "You're under arrest!"

Haskett had angled the rifle up. "In case you haven't noticed, lad, I have you covered."

"Haskett, you can't——"

"There are a thousand miles of snow between us and the next higher authority in this organization. The 'white barrier'

Cromwell called it. On the north side of that barrier, the only ruler is the man with the gun. I'm the man with the gun, Donnelly." Haskett's face twisted as he pulled a grin around that old frost scar. "Draw your revolver. With two fingers. Drop it in the snow. Then take three steps forward."

Donnelly lifted the gun as he had been told. His fingers were trembling and it slipped, struck his leg, bounded away leaving a little shadow-mark where it disappeared in snow. He took the three steps forward.

"You can't get away with this Haskett."

"That remains to be seen. You're under arrest. Call it temporary restraint. I doubt that Cromwell will be Acting-Inspector here much longer. That leaves me the ranking officer. You can't tell, Donnelly, cooperating with me like this might mean advancement for you."

The door opened. Gray came out. It took him a moment to realize what was going on. There was a gun at his waist. He might have gone for it, but Belaire was behind him.

"No trouble, Gray," Haskett said. "I'm going uphill."

"Are you insane——"

"Licked both ways. Sometimes the only answer is a shootout."

Haskett started away. He glimpsed movement in the dawn-shadows half way to the house. Jerges.

Haskett's rifle was leveled, hip-high. The two guns hammered so close their reports blended.

Jerges was hit. The bullet spun him half around. He dropped his rifle and fell face down. He got up, fingers tearing mackinaw and shirt open.

"Don't shoot. Don't shoot." He kept whispering the words over and over as he made it across the parade ground.

Haskett scarcely glanced at him as he strode on to the big house.

No movement, no light, no sound. But Cromwell would be waiting.

Hinges squeaked. That was the front door. Shadow too deep beneath the porch to tell. Haskett kept coming.

Cromwell's voice, "You're asking for it!"

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Haskett hurled himself forward, twisting to his side. The porch blackness was knifed by powderflame. He felt the flutter of air as the high-velocity bronze-point went past.

He fired an instant later. Impossible to aim. He rolled over at the same instant, leaped to the momentary protection of some bushes that made little, snow-filled clumps. Bullets from the Enfield ripped through the frozen twigs. Haskett ran a few steps, dropped once again to hands and knees.

Silence now. Squared logs formed the base of the porch, the top one smoothed to make a sort of rail. Cromwell would be crouched behind them, or he might have backed through the still-opened doorway.

HASKETT was belly down, finding his way through the bushes into the open. He pulled himself forward by rocking from elbow to elbow. He kept watching the door.

The range was short now. He kept going, closer and closer. Cromwell was not on the porch. He'd gone back inside.

The porch was only eight or ten steps away. To Haskett, lying down, its log front seemed to tower high. He raised himself to hands and knees. He shouted,

"Cromwell, I'm taking you in. Do you hear me? I'm taking you to Athabasca Landing and charging you with murder."

He heard the man laugh. A short, harsh sound. Movement in the darkness of the door. Haskett was on one knee, rifle lifted. His finger was on the cold steel of the trigger.

Cromwell was holding the girl in front of him.

She saw Haskett an instant later. A scream tore her throat. She twisted, but Cromwell held her powerless with one arm. There was a revolver in his other hand.

"See the gun, Haskett?"

"Yes."

He pressed its muzzle to her side, just at the base of her ribs. "Maybe you don't think I'd pull the trigger."

There was something in the way he said it—something that showed the intensity of his hatred for the girl who had defied him, and for the man who was stalking him.

"You'll never get away with it, Cromwell. It will hang you in the barracks at Winnipeg."

Cromwell answered, "Perhaps! But you'll be in no condition to enjoy it."

He cocked the revolver. Its two crisp clicks bounded through the winter air. He was holding the girl across his chest, and though he towered fully a head above, Haskett did not dare try a snap-shot.

"Stand up!" Cromwell barked.

Haskett got to his feet. The rifle was still in one hand.

"Drop the rifle."

Haskett flung it so it landed flat in snow six or eight feet ahead.

He was straight, unprotected. Cromwell remained as he was, girl close, revolver muzzle pressed to her side.

Then, with a quick movement, he flung her away.

The revolver angled down. It pounded, driving bullet and fragments of burning powder.

But Haskett was no longer there. He'd anticipated the movement. He hit the snow face first. His rifle was exactly where he'd intended. He rolled once, gaining fragmentary protection behind the porch logs.

The revolver again. It was close enough to deafen one ear and lash his cheek with burning powder. He came to his feet.

Cromwell fired. Sergeant Haskett was set to take the heavy bullet and fire his rifle anyway. But the revolver slug went wild.

He couldn't stop his act of aiming the rifle and pulling the trigger. The girl had grabbed Cromwell's arm and was wrestling with him. Haskett let the stock slip from his arm, and the bullet tore white slivers from the top of the door casing.

Cromwell flung the girl away with a swing of his powerful arm. She struck the front of the house, twenty feet away. Haskett glimpsed her falling.

Cromwell was trying to bring the revolver around for another shot. Haskett smashed it down. The gun flew from Cromwell's fingers, thudded across snowy porch planks.

No room for Haskett to bring the rifle barrel around. Cromwell had seized it,

anyway. He rammed the gun up, tearing it from Haskett's hands.

Haskett let it go, set his muscles, and smashed a one-two left and right to Cromwell's jaw.

Cromwell reeled, letting the gun fall. By accident or intent, he made it through the open doorway. He grabbed the heavy plank door, tried to close it. It struck Haskett's shoulder, bounded back.

Cromwell still retreated, shaking his powerful head like a stunned moose. Flames from half-consumed logs lighted the front room. He stopped, eyes on Haskett.

"The showdown?" he snarled.

"Yes."

"Maybe it's just as well this way. I'm going to kill you. I'd just as soon tear the life out of you with these two hands.

He was crouched. His hands were thrust out, fingers spread. He seemed to be showing their strength. He leaped back, seized the grizzly-bear rug Haskett stood on, jerked it.

Haskett struck the floor on hip and outflung arm.

Quick as a massive, forest cat, Cromwell swung his right boot. The heel struck Haskett's head.

Haskett rose as the boot swung again.

His parka was pulled around, binding him. He wished he could take it off, but of course that was impossible. He located Cromwell. Only a second or two had passed. The man had backed away, seized a heavy chair, swung it.

Haskett fended it off with his forearm. It splintered on the floor.

Missing the blow threw Cromwell off balance. It was only a half-second, but a half-second was too long.

Haskett smashed him with a right.

The blow started in his heels, accumulated the entire whiplash power of his body. It snapped Cromwell's head to one side. Sent him reeling, off-balance, hair strung over his forehead.

He rammed the wall, rebounded, tripped over the toes of his polished boots. His left arm fended off another blow. He flung both arms around Haskett.

He was groggy, but still strong. Like a cornered animal, he fought for life.

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Fought for the few seconds that would give him another chance.

Haskett tore himself free. His body came back with a snap. He smashed Cromwell to the floor.

Cromwell lay with arms outflung, blood trickling from one corner of his mouth.

MARIE was in the door, holding Haskett's rifle.

"Let me have it," he said.

He leaned it against the table, stripped off his parka. The cuffs jingled on his belt. He clicked them shut on Cromwell's wrists.

"You can do that?" she whispered. "The commander? You must escape, M'shu."

"He's guilty of murder. I'm a policeman. I'll take him downriver if I hang for it."

Someone else was coming. He lifted the rifle.

"Come in!"

It was Donnelly.

"Put down the rifle. Let's talk this over." There was a revolver in Donnelly's hand, but he kept it pointed at the floor. He called over his shoulder, "Bring him inside."

Jerges appeared, bent over, holding his side. Gray walked behind, pointing a revolver.

"I'm hit. Hit hard," Jerges was panting. His eyes had a trapped-weasel quality as they fastened themselves on Haskett, on the rifle in his hands.

Haskett said, "I'll see you hanged, too, before I'm through."

Gray said, "He'll confess."

"I didn't do nothin'," Jerges whined. "Honest to God, I didn't. He wanted me to kill the Inspector, Cromwell did——"

"Why did he want you to murder Inspector Steffles?"

"Because Steffles was on his way over to settle that ruckus with Belaire who would have been able to tell plenty about Cromwell makin' money out of trappin' rights. Steffles would have run Cromwell off the force."

"How long has he been making money for trapping rights?"

"Two-three year. Handed out the good ground to them that paid the most. He sent me to arrest Belaire but not to bring him in. Wanted me to blast him and claim he tried to escape. But I'm no killer. He got McCole—Cromwell did. Don't let anything happen to me, Haskett. I'll testify."

Cromwell was sitting up, staring at his manacled wrists. Jerges' voice came to him. He cursed, heaved his massive bulk upright. He seized the remnants of the chair and would have charged the wounded, frightened Jerges, but with a deliberate swing of his body, Haskett once more hammered him to the floor.

The blow took skin from Haskett's knuckles. He looked at them, showing his teeth with satisfaction.

"The most valuable witness in the North. The witness will put a rope around your neck, Cromwell. You can bet blue chips I'll protect him."

Daylight was coming through the big front window. Haskett scraped frost away and looked across the broad stretch of Rainy Lake at the sun rising cold and pale over distant, spruce-purple hills. He tried to remember the last time he'd slept. He was tired, but for the first time since the murder of Inspector Steffles he was at peace with his conscience.

He'd caught the killer.

There was noise on the stairs. He looked around. Marie Belaire was coming down, dressed for the cold, looking tiny in the depths of her long, fur-hooded parka.

He walked to her.

"You're going?"

"Yes, M'shu."

She stopped on the step above him. He wanted to say something, but he wasn't good at speaking his mind with women.

"Maybe you will once more visit the auction?" she asked.

She had taken her hands from her fur mittens. She reached, laying fingertips on his shoulders.

It seemed like the most inescapable thing in life that he should kiss her.

"I'll come for you a long time before that," he said. "A long, long time!"

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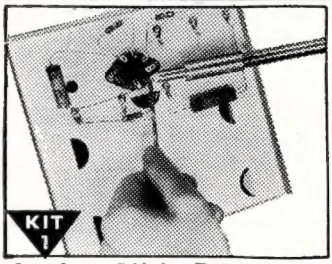

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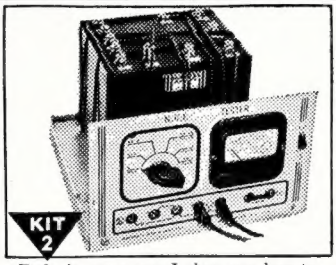

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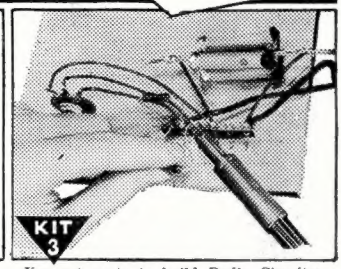

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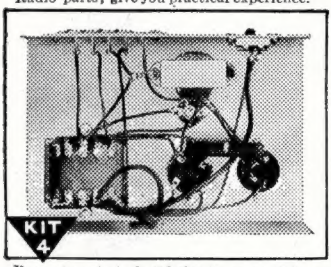

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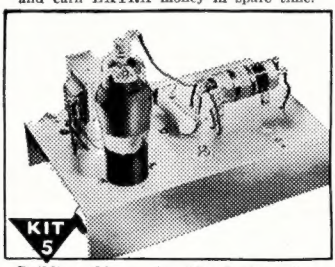

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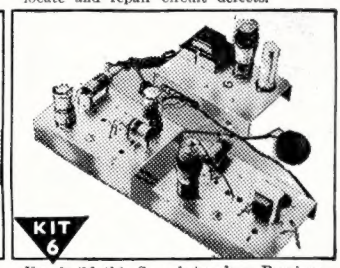

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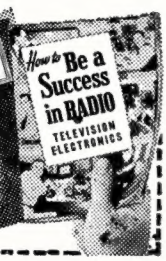

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